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Founder

Dr. Narendra Dabholkar
(1945-2013)

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Karnataka Assembly passes anti-superstition bill

Belagavi (Ktk), Nov 16 (PTI)

The Karnataka government's much-hyped anti-superstition bill to prevent and eradicate "inhuman evil practices" was unanimously passed in the Legislative Assembly today with some minor amendments. The Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Bill, 2017, tabled in the Assembly on Tuesday, (14 Nov 2017), states that it intends to protect the common people against "evil" and "sinister" practices. The bill seeks to combat and eradicate other such inhuman practices propagated and performed in the name of "black magic" by conman with sinister motive of exploiting the common people, thereby destroying the social fabric in the society. Further, it aims to bring social awakening and awareness in the society and create healthy and safe social environment.

Replying to the debate, Social Justice Minister H Anjaneya said certain minor amendments sought by some members would be made part of the bill. Practices like Mudradharane by Madhwa Brahmins has been exempted. As per this practice, Mudras (dyes) usually made of gold or copper are heated on coal fire and stamped on the body. Vashikarana, practised in occult science as an act of subjugation or advertising about it in the name of treatment has been banned, following the suggestions made by the members during the debate.

The legislation was earlier proposed as The Evil, Inhuman and Superstitious Practices Prevention Bill. After omitting the word superstitious, it is now titled The Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Bill, 2017. Cleared by the government on September 27, the Cabinet had earlier discussed the bill under the title The Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and Other Inhuman Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Bill. It had in July 2016 referred the legislation to a Cabinet sub-committee headed by Revenue Minister Kagodu Thimmappa, citing that most of the ministers wanted the bill to be studied in detail before coming to any decision.

Anjaneya, explaining the contents of the bill to the House, sought support of members in unanimously passing it with an intention to eradicate all evil practices from the society. Chief Minister [Siddaramaiah](#) said the governments intention through this bill was towards eradication of social evils and secure those who are being oppressed in the name of such practices. "Our intention is not to hurt anyones sentiments or feelings as being projected. There should be no place for such practices in todays world," he said.

Stating that there were provisions to make any addition or deletion, Law Minister T B Jayachandra had earlier said the bill was similar to the one in Maharashtra. But the Karnataka bill has savings and schedule categories, which classify the practices that could be tolerated and those that need to be controlled or prohibited.

According to the bill, for removal of doubts, nothing in the Act shall apply with respect to the forms of worship mentioned under the heading savings and they include practices like pradakshina, yatras, parikramas performed at religious places, among other normal practices. It also includes the advice with regard to Vastushastra, advice by jyothishya and other astrologers. Those practices which have been included under the schedule for prohibition are -- performing any inhuman, evil act and black magic in search of precious things, bounty and hidden treasures. Other practices listed under 16 points for prohibition, include facilitating any person to roll over leaves of leftover food by other persons in any public or religious places or similar practices that violate human dignity. Also, forcing any person to carry out evil practices such as killing of an animal by biting its neck and coercing any person or persons to perform fire walk at the time of jatras (temple/village fest) and religious festivals have also been included, it added.

Stressing the need for educating people about evil practices in the society, Opposition BJP Leader Jagadish Shettar said "if we dont educate, then it just becomes another record."

<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/karnataka-assembly-passes-anti-superstition-bill/1/1091248.html>

Courtesy: PTI

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Across the aisle: The killed and the killers

P Chidambaram

Joan of Arc was burnt at the stake. Socrates was made to drink from the poisoned chalice. Sir Thomas More was beheaded. For their beliefs. In recent times, five murders have shaken the conscience of the people of India. The media is focusing on who was the killer in each case. The police in the states concerned are searching for the killer(s). Some arrests have been made but the cases are nowhere near being solved. Both the media and the police are right in focusing on the killers. I have a slightly different take.

I think it is important that the people should ask the question who was killed. We know the name, life and work of each of the five persons who was killed but the killings will make sense only if we put all the information into a frame.

Narendra Dabholkar (1945-2013)

Narendra Dabholkar was a medical doctor. A little known fact is that he was a member of the Indian kabbaddi team that played Bangladesh. What irked his detractors was he was Maharashtra's most prominent rationalist and anti-superstition activist. Dabholkar had penned

more than a dozen books, edited a weekly for 16 years, founded the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti and trained more than 10,000 teachers on how to fight superstition and inculcate a scientific temper in students. Many years ago, he had drafted the Anti-Superstition and Black Magic Bill. The irony is an ordinance based on the draft was promulgated by the state government four days after Dabholkar was killed on August 20, 2013.

Govind Pansare (1933-2015)

Govind Pansare was a life-long communist. He was born in a poor family, held low-paid jobs like newspaper vendor and municipal peon, became a lawyer practising labour law, and was a well-known writer who authored the Marathi language book Who was Shivaji?. He was the state secretary of the CPI and promoted the Shramik Nagari Sahakari Patsanstha (a cooperative bank). He ran a centre for couples who had entered into inter-caste or inter-faith marriages and that earned him bitter criticism.

M M Kalburgi (1938-2015)

M M Kalburgi was a renowned professor, a former vice-chancellor of Kannada University at Hampi, a prolific writer and winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2006. He wrote and spoke against superstition and idol worship in Hinduism and incurred the wrath of right-wing groups. A case was filed against him and U R Ananthamurthy in 2015 for 'offending religious sentiments' in a book that was published 18 years ago!

Gauri Lankesh (1962-2017)

Gauri Lankesh was a self-confessed Leftist and a fierce activist in support of Left causes, including pro-Naxalite causes. She helped in rehabilitating Naxalite cadres who desired to return to the mainstream. Gauri edited and published a tabloid that was anti-establishment, pro-poor and pro-Dalit, and was highly critical of right-wing and Hindutva policies. In the months prior to her murder, she campaigned against fake news. She refused to be cowed down by threats and remained fearless until her last day.

Shantanu Bhowmick (1989-2017)

Shantanu Bhowmick was a young reporter for a TV channel telecast from Agartala, Tripura, earning about Rs 6,000 per month. He is remembered as a courageous journalist who would always be the first to rush to the scene of an incident, determined to be the first to get a scoop and record live-from-ground-zero reports. Shantanu also ran a small nursery school called 'Manobik' (Bengali word, meaning humane) from his home. His last assignment was covering an agitation by the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura.

None of the above was a rich person ('rich' in the sense that is usually associated with exploiting the poor). None wielded political power or even sought political power. None held an important

office at the time of the murder. None believed in violence. Three were old men, one was middle-aged and one was young.

Each one of the five was an educated person and apparently comfortable in the world of ideas and debate. Ideas should ordinarily threaten no one, but apparently they do. There are people who fear ideas and a rational debate over their ideas and rival ideas. I wonder who could resent, to the point of causing death, ideas such as anti-superstition, anti-idolatry and scientific temper? Who could be enraged by the few inter-caste and inter-faith marriages that take place in society? Who could be provoked by an avowed Leftist when there are thousands of declared communists? Who could be inimical to a young, intrepid journalist who was covering an agitation by a tribal group?

It is not difficult to construct a picture of the person or persons who probably committed these despicable murders. Almost certainly, they belong to right-wing groups. They are deeply conservative to the point of being reactionary. They resent ideas that challenge their own ideas. They question free speech and India's diversity. They are intolerant. They spread hate. They are emboldened when they are among like-minded people and take to violence — even murder — when they are in a group.

With that profile of the killer(s), 'who was killed' should have led the investigative agencies, by now, to 'who were the killers'. Names of some key suspects are common in four cases and some have been declared absconders. Meanwhile, hate and fear spread and we hang our heads in grief and shame.

<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-killed-and-the-killers-gauri-lankesh-murder-4879610/>

Courtesy: Indian Express



Politics of divine intervention

Venkatesh Ramkrishnan

One of the proposals that came up when the M.N. Venkatachaliah Commission on Constitutional Review was set up by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 2000 was to include "spiritualism" in the preamble of the Constitution. Although the stated premise for the proposal, made by a group of Hindu sanyasins of Karnataka, was that this "would help arrest moral degradation in society", its larger political import became part of the discussions among observers of the Commission. It was pointed out during the discussions that the acceptance of the proposal could impart a kind of legitimacy to the relationship

and association that the political class, especially those who have attained positions of power, have with the so-called spiritual gurus. Perhaps realising the dangers awarding such legitimacy would pose to the fundamental tenets of the Constitution, the proposal did not become part of the recommendations of the Commission. However, it did bring into focus the nexus between spiritual leaders and the political leadership that has existed in different forms in independent India.

This association has had a qualitative evolution, mirroring the country's larger political course in some ways. It is a trajectory that has progressively reflected the twin issues of corruption and decadence. In the early years of Independence, the relationships between the political class and spiritual leaders were marked by intellectual and progress-oriented discourses. These were gradually replaced by vested interests to promote the pursuit of power and wealth employing any abject means. This trajectory is also represented by a number of key associations between individual political leaders and spiritual practitioners. In many ways, these individual associations also depict the shift in the larger political course, including in terms of political economy. Consider these associations: Jawaharlal Nehru with Swami Agehananda Bharati and Swami Akshay Brahmachari, Indira Gandhi with Dharendra Brahmachari, P.V. Narasimha Rao with Chandraswami, Vajpayee and L.K. Advani with Mahant Ramachandra Paramahans and Mahant Nritya Gopal Das, Narendra Modi with Baba Ramdev, Asaram Bapu and Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh. The gradation is revealing at multiple levels, but primarily at the levels of integrity and quality.

In the course of a long interaction with this writer in the 1990s, Swami Akshay Brahmachari, freedom fighter and founder of the Satya Ashram in Uttar Pradesh, spoke about the degeneration in the "Indian league of politics and divinity". He drew on his personal experience as well as his observations to underscore this decline. He believed that Mahatma Gandhi was more a spiritual practitioner than a politician despite his apparent involvement in political matters. This belief led Akshay Brahmachari to join the freedom struggle and active politics. A proponent of Vedanta and Gandhism right from his teenage, he was an active participant in the political and organisational affairs of the Congress. He would often paraphrase Bengali writer Abu Sayeed Ayyub's description that "Nehru was a social engineer, and Gandhi a spiritual healer", adding that he sought to imbibe both the personalities into his own self. In both these roles his main area of operation, geographically, was the Lucknow-Barabanki-Faizabad-Ayodhya region while at the conceptual level, he steadfastly maintained that secularism and communal harmony were the guiding principles of both Vedanta and Gandhism. He sought to advance his teachings and practice of Vedanta from the Satya Ashram, which he set up at Chihat between Lucknow and Barabanki. He was elected secretary of the Faizabad District Congress Committee when he was in his 30s and a member of the Provincial Congress Committee of Uttar Pradesh later.

As a member of the Provincial Congress Committee he took a firm stand against the surreptitious installation of the idol of Rama inside in the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1949 by Hindutva elements led by the Hindu Mahasabha and the Sangh Parivar. He cautioned the Union

government, including Nehru and his Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, that this was nothing but a criminal incursion that sought to advance a heinous Hindutva communalisation project by terrorising the Muslim minority community. Akshay Brahmachari followed up these statements made through letters and memoranda with mass mobilisation and agitation highlighting the need to protect social harmony and the rights of the minority communities. Nehru completely agreed with Akshay Brahmachari and supported his actions although sections of the ruling Congress in Ayodhya and other parts of Uttar Pradesh were hand in glove with the Hindutva communalists. Akshay Brahmachari persisted with his spirited opposition to Hindutva communalism until his death in 2010.

This writer had several interactions with Akshay Brahmachari through the 1990s and the 2000s. During one such interaction in 1998, immediately after the Atal Behari Vajpayee-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power at the Centre, Akshay Brahmachari talked at length about the “Indian league of politics and divinity”. He recalled that Nehru, a self-professed agnostic, had described himself as “religious, but not of the temple going type”, and said Nehru’s close association with several spiritual practitioners, including himself and Agehananda Bharati, was a clear testimony to this. “Panditji maintained a steady dialogue with spiritual practitioners of different denominations. While the communication with those like Agehananda Bharati—an Austrian Hindu monk belonging to the Dasanami Sanyasi order and a reputed academic—was essentially at the level of intellectual discourses on subjects ranging from interpretations of Vedanta, materialism and secularism. With those like me, who had a wider connect to the grassroots, he dwelt on direct social and political issues. All these interactions were solemn and purposive and were guided by the fundamental stimulus of evolving a better, harmonious and progressive India.”

Akshay Brahmachari even made a comparison between the spiritual leaders in Nehru’s fraternity and those close to Vajpayee and Advani in 1998. “The so-called spiritual leaders these people are in cohorts with, the ones such as Mahant Ramchandra Paramahans and Nritya Gopal Das, are certified lumpens as per the police records of Ayodhya and Faizabad. There are dozens of cases against them with such grave charges as land grabbing and attempt to murder. Ramchandra Paramahans openly boasts that he had a hand in the smuggling of the idol of Rama into the Babri Masjid, which is evidently a criminal act. Yet, he is accorded an important place even in meetings attended by Vajpayee and Advani. Just as Nehru’s fraternity with spiritual practitioners signified a virtuous acme, the band leaders such as Vajpayee and Advani have put together mark a nadir of nefariousness.”

Akshay Brahmachari, a Gandhian who wanted to assimilate the qualities of the “spiritual healer and the social engineer” in his personality, did admit during the course of the discussions on that day that Nehru’s successors, including his daughter Indira Gandhi, who was Prime Minister for approximately 15 years over three terms, and P.V. Narasimha Rao (Prime Minister in the 1991-96

period), had paved the way for the “nadir of nefariousness that he perceived during the 1998 regime”. The notorious proximity that Dharendra Brahmachari had with Indira Gandhi and the equally controversial association Narasimha Rao had with Chandraswami were evidently exiguous in terms of spiritual and intellectual value or social significance. The relationship both these Prime Ministers had with the super-rich Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi (Andhra Pradesh) was also similarly bereft of spiritual eminence. Sai Baba’s self-aggrandisement propaganda was such that he ascribed to himself the title of God the Creator of the Entire Universe. Both these leaders ignored the accusations of serial sexual abuses against him. Indeed, a far cry from the relationship Nehru had with Swami Agehananda Bharati and Akshay Brahmachari. Like the leaders of the Sangh Parivar, these Congress Prime Ministers, too, employed their godmen associates to strategise for elections, harm their political opponents and, more importantly, strengthen their financial power by advancing questionable patronage regime deals.

Narendra Modi, who would follow Vajpayee and Advani to power, did not figure in Akshay Brahmachari’s comparative analysis that day. That was because Modi was still not a big-time player in the BJP at that time and his connections with godmen such as Asaram Bapu—who along with his son Narayan Sai would be later charged with serial rapes of followers and their relatives—had not been widely noticed. However, there is little doubt that under Modi’s regime, both at the Centre and in the State of Gujarat before that, self-anointed godmen and godwomen got freedom and patronage to operate in whatever manner they wanted. Many of those who had the support of the person in power indulged in a spree of criminal activities and the “nadir of nefariousness” sunk to unprecedented depths. Asaram Bapu is a clear case in point. Right from the time he became Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi has been a regular patron of Asaram Bapu and his veneration of the con guru has been recorded ever so many times. Modi’s association with Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the jailed Sirsa-based Dera Sacha Sauda leader, is well recorded and lays bare a politician’s ingratiation to seek electoral support.

Business interests

Beyond the more and more palpable criminality of the so-called spiritual leaders, which is getting repeatedly exposed through a combination of factors, including disillusioned followers who have made bold to stand up to the con gurus, the support they have received from sections of the media and the dispassionate adjudication of some cases relating to criminal activities of the spiritual pretenders, the substantive financial empires built by almost all of them also stand out. This amassment of wealth is undoubtedly facilitated by the proximity to political leadership of all hues. This is a phenomenon that had been noticed right from the time of the Indira Gandhi-Dhirendra Brahmachari association. The business interest of Dharendra Brahmachari, the self-professed “yoga guru and world peace promoter”, was of all things, in setting up a gun factory. Investigations in the 1980s had pointed to serious irregularities in the functioning of the Shiva Gun Factory set up by Dharendra Brahmachari in Jammu. It was alleged at that time that the gun barrels used for manufacture in the Jammu factory were imported illegally.

Chandraswami, too, had connections with arms dealers such as Adnan Khashoggi. But the biggest case against him was the St Kitts affair. He, along with his associate Kailash Nath Aggarwal alias Mamaji, Narasimha Rao and former Union Minister K.K. Tewari, was accused of forging documents to implicate Ajeya Singh, son of former Prime Minister V.P. Singh. The documents allegedly forged by Chandraswami sought to prove that Ajeya Singh had opened a bank account in First Trust Corporation Bank in St Kitts and deposited \$21 million. Chandraswami was acquitted in the case in 2004 for lack of evidence. But the controversies over the political conspiracies he hatched and his collusion with the Narasimha Rao regime to expand his own business interests as well as that of his friends and associates remained in focus for decades.

While the benefits Dharendra Brahmachari and Chandraswami reaped from their Congress connections are legendary, the patronage regime that developed under the BJP governments of Vajpayee and Modi was much bigger, in terms of the scale and quantum of money involved. These BJP governments also patronised a number of self-anointed godmen and godwomen. The Modi regime, in particular, extended its promotion of crony capitalism into the realm of godmen entrepreneurship. If Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani are Modi's favourites in the conventional business sector, Baba Ramdev, who had converted his yoga *shivirs* (yoga summits) into political platforms for Modi and the BJP, is undoubtedly the Prime Minister's most preferred godman entrepreneur. The rise of Baba Ramdev's Patanjali empire in a short span of three years is an affirmation of this. Baba Ramdev's transformation from being a yoga guru to India's biggest fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) operator, who produces everything from soaps to noodles to energy boosters, is amazing. Patanjali's turnover for 2016-17 was Rs.10,561 crore. According to Baba Ramdev, Patanjali's growth is expected to double by next year. He was confident that "Patanjali would be in the leading position, and in most product categories it would be number one". To achieve this, several Patanjali centres have enhanced their target for production. Mega production units in Noida (Uttar Pradesh), Nagpur (Maharashtra) and Indore (Madhya Pradesh) are being set up to manufacture goods worth Rs.60,000 crore.

Along with stories of political patronage that is facilitating all this, there are also allegations of illegal operations in these centres and suppression of those who have sought to expose this. Investigations into charges against Asaram revealed massive questionable financial dealings. Estimates are that the financial empire built up through illegal transactions could be valued at around Rs.10,000 crore. Asaram's operations included the racket of black money cash loans, property trading and even investments in foreign companies in blatant violation of FEMA regulations. It was also estimated that the lending racket of black money cash loans involved around Rs.1,600 crore and the investments in foreign companies violating FEMA regulations is to the tune of Rs.1,500 crore.

Evidently, the crime graph of the self-anointed spiritual leaders is becoming starker. The usual crime stories of dacoity, land grab and rape are being supplemented with documentation of

financial crimes too. This trajectory mirrors the larger parameters of the country's political economy, especially the way it has developed since the early 1990s since globalisation.

This qualitative dimension has yet another eerie similarity with the power acquirement narrative of the current dispensation. After all, Modi's emergence into the world of power, along with his close associate Amit Shah, who is the BJP president, was in the background of one of the most criminal minority genocides in world history.

<http://www.frontline.in/the-nation/politics-of-divine-intervention/article9873971.ece>

Courtesy: Frontline

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Demystifying the Indian guru and his psycho-social relationship with millions of followers

There are currently three dominant ways of thinking about the Indian devotion to contemporary gurus. The first suggests that it has something to do with the nature of a society in transition. So, it is said that as large numbers are faced with economic and social uncertainty—lack of job prospects, changes in family structures—they turn to gurus who have quick answers to problems. The increasing attraction of religious leaders is also being seen as part of a larger context where Indian society is itself becoming more religious.

The second perspective is that it is the economically underprivileged who are the most susceptible to the seductions of gurus, and also the most prone to react in violent ways when their living icons are subjected to secular law and reduced to the status of mortals. They have, the argument goes, much more to lose since gurus provide both symbolic—overcoming caste-linked humiliation—as well material succour. We are told that at Gurmeet Ram Rahim's *dera*, all followers were treated as equals (taking on the surname "Insaan") and the organisation ran schools and hospitals that looked after the needs that the state was unable to.

Third, the growth of gurus is attributed to the political patronage they enjoy, their leaders being able to influence disciples to vote for this or that political party. The political uses of special interest groups is not, however, a particularly Indian phenomenon. There are other aspects that are more interesting

Perceived binary

It is not clear, however, that Indians have become more religious. What is more obvious is that the solid bedrock of religious feeling has become more visible through the explosion of different forms of media and that religion has become mediatised and commoditised. The new guru is more visible

than the older one and operates in different ways. An awareness of the long history of gurus and ashrams—the Swaminarayan sect, Ramakrishna Mission, Radha Soami Satsang, Divine Light Mission, among others—should alert us that contemporary religiosity might be different in quality, rather than intensity.

The idea that people turn to—and take comfort in—tradition in times of rapid change has become a kind of analytical common sense. It is usual to suggest that the most natural reaction to processes of intensive change is the search for meaning in older forms of associations such as the extended family and the religious community. The idea of preserving the self under conditions of modernity is itself part of a more general understanding of the nature of the inner life in India and occurs in a number of contexts of analysis. So, at the present moment, it is common to come across the argument that excessive consumerism is leading to a renewed turn towards religiosity as a reaction to excessive materialism.

The perceived binary between religion (via the guru) and materialism (via the market) is frequently invoked both by those on the right, and others who wish to suggest that there is an authentic India that has been spoilt by the unchecked incursions of consumerist modernity. This way of thinking about our present wishes away a very significant aspect of our contemporary lives.

To suggest that people make a choice between the home and the world and that those who are caught in-between suffer unbearable tension and a split personality is to miss the rise of the threshold personality. It is also to mistake the apparent for the actual: The apparently autonomous realms of religiosity and market are really not as separable as that. We need to recognise that the market *is* the grounds for the making of a variety of social experiences and that it makes little sense to believe that people are torn between having to choose between spiritualism and its antithesis. Our lives are increasingly lived on thresholds, our everyday choices a mixture of *seeming* opposites.

Part of the Change

It isn't just that Gurmeet Ram Rahim's followers choose to belong to Dera Sacha Sauda as a way of resisting the forces of change. Rather, they choose to belong because they want to be part of the change: Dera Sacha Sauda offers the choice of multiple worlds. It offers apparent equality, access to spiritual life, ministrations of everyday needs, as well as being part of the world of goods. It is in this sense that Ram Rahim's Dalit following cannot simply be reduced to a simplistic and undifferentiated Dalit identity.

Dalits do not only have a political identity—in the sense of an oppressed identity politics—they are also aspirational subjects, seeking to move beyond that identity. They seek the right—like non-Dalits—to be taken seriously as complex human beings. The unfortunate thing is that this is a choice offered to them by self-serving and frequently criminal gurus.

What then about the point relating to the primarily non-elite nature of Gurmeet Ram Rahim's following and their supposed propensity for irrational behaviour and violence? It hardly needs

saying that in India there is a differentiated market for gurus: There are those who appeal to the middle classes, upper castes, lower castes etc. What is important to remember is that each following expresses mob frenzy—and its destructive force—in different ways. Mob frenzy is not just an aspect of the actions of the non-middle class disciples.

It is just as important a part of the followers of, say, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as that of Gurmeet Ram Rahim. The mobilisation of collective opinion by Art of Living followers against the findings of the National Green Tribunal regarding the damage caused by Art of Living's "World Culture Festival" to the Yamuna floodplain in Delhi in March 2016 is, really, another form of mob action.

Shankar was to later suggest if the tribunal was aware that the floodplains would suffer environmental damage then it—and not Art of Living—should be penalized for granting permission for the festival. Perhaps the Art of Living founder should also have mentioned that the tribunal was not able to withstand the collective pressure applied to it in favour of Art of Living. The streets occupied by the Art of Living followers—and the damage caused to public property—are different to that traversed by Dera Sacha Sauda's disciples. However, this does not change the fact that it is mob frenzy by another name.

The truth of the matter is that irrespective of social context and class fraction, we are a society deeply wedded to collective action. There are complex reasons for this. What remains constant is the mobilisation of group identities in the name of individual salvation. And, the charisma of the guru (usually a male) lies in the fact that he is able to convince his followers that his own acts are not anti-social but a-social. That he is beyond the society he seeks to transform on their behalf. This also lies at the heart of why Ram Rahim's female supporters continue to support a convicted rapist.

This psycho-social relationship between the guru and the follower is the tragedy of love, devotion, and admiration.

<https://qz.com/1064515/ram-rahim-to-sri-sri-ravi-shankar-demystifying-the-indian-guru-and-his-psycho-social-relationship-with-millions-of-followers/>

Courtesy: Scroll.in

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Godmen's Own Country

Meera Nanda

Insan: Human. Homo sapiens

This sweet Urdu word immediately evokes fellow feeling. In a community of insans, how does it matter who you are? It is your humanity, your insanियat, that counts.

Dera Sacha Sauda, the religious order that burst into the national headlines recently, insists on identifying all followers as insans. Indeed, the moniker "insan" has almost become the trademark of Sacha Sauda and sets it apart from the competing deras (camps) in the region.

Ten years ago, the Dera's godman, Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan, began a new initiation ceremony which he called Jaam-e-Insan. Those who wished to join the Dera were to drink a ruhani jaam—a jaam, or a peg, of "humanitarian nectar" made of water, milk and rose essence (rooh-afza). Partaking of the nectar was followed by reciting a 47-point pledge (naam) whose very first commandment to the initiate was to replace (or at least, supplement) his/her caste name with one simple word, "insan". No longer a "Sharma, Verma, Arora, Sandhu, etc." (to cite the Dera's website), all were now reborn as Insan, human beings. The ceremony took place on April 29 each year, the foundation day of the 69-year-old religious order, and used to be conducted by the baba himself. (The similarities with the Sikh baptism ceremony, which involves drinking of amrit [nectar] and recitation of the "Ik Onkar" verse from the Granth Sahib, are striking.)

Now that Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan, aka Messenger of God, has finally got his comeuppance for his crimes, the diabolical nature of this seductive but hollow and corrupted humanism stands exposed. It capitalises on the very real hunger for fellow feeling among the struggling masses of our society and turns it into political currency to be traded for political and economic advantage.

In a society where surnames are dead giveaways for one's caste status, it is easy to understand why such a religion of insaniyat would appeal to those who have been denied a life of dignity. What is more, Sacha Sauda supplements the symbolic humanism with material humanitarianism: it runs a network of social welfare programmes like schools, health and de-addiction clinics, speciality hospitals and vocational training programmes. Dera Sacha Sauda describes itself as a "Social Welfare and Spiritual" organisation for which it gets tax breaks and grants from the state.

It is this whole package, which ties together the need for community, spiritual meaning and material welfare, that explains the explosive growth in the popularity of Sacha Sauda, with a membership running upward of 60 million, concentrated in the States of Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and Maharashtra but apparently spread all over the world. For all the evidence of criminality, from rapes to murders and castrations, the "premis" remain loyal to their guru, with thousands of them terrorising the city of Panchkula after his conviction.

Providing food security, education and health are the basic obligations of the state. In a secular democracy like we claim to be, no citizen should have to barter his or her "ruhani" (spiritual) aspirations to have access to basic goods and services. Yet, this is the New Deal of neoliberal India: the fundamental social functions of the state have been "spiritualised" and contracted out to gurus and ashrams, which have amassed great wealth and power in the process.

Noxious nexus

Plenty has already been written on the serial complicity of all major political parties in courting the convicted guru who, in turn, played each one of them for his own ends. In 2009, it was the Congress that received his support and won 40 assembly seats in Haryana; in 2014, it was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that got his nod and shot up from 4 to 47 seats to form the

government. Once in power, a payback was expected and duly delivered. Barely 10 days before he was convicted, senior Ministers of Haryana were in attendance with Rs.51 lakh—all from public funds—as a birthday gift for the godman. There is plenty of evidence to show that the state machinery of Haryana went easy on the rampaging devotees because it was beholden to the godman for being in power in the first place.

Through all of this, the Dera managed to accumulate great wealth, with assets in land and the entertainment industry, including Ram Rahim's movie and music ventures, running into billions of rupees. Following the lead of Baba Ramdev, the Dera launched its MSG brand of consumer items, including rice, pickles, honey and biscuits. According to *Jansatta*, the daily income of the Dera was over Rs.16 lakh—and that was three years ago. The icing on the cake is that all this wealth is exempt from income tax because the Dera is a religious institution.

In a nutshell, this is how the state-temple-business nexus works: the godmen buy them with votes of their followers, and they pay back with subsidies and protection, while both parties get rich on the spoils of their collaboration.

The two women who pursued justice against great odds and succeeded in having their rapist convicted deserve our admiration and gratitude—admiration for their courage, and gratitude for helping us see up close the workings of a prominent state-sponsored spiritual corporation. It is now up to us to understand the dangers of what we are faced with and do something to break this noxious nexus between spirituality, politics and money.

The biggest danger of the tie-up between state and religious institutions lies in the erosion of legal-rational sources of authority and the growth of charismatic authority centred on God-like men and women. Indeed, the very words that Max Weber, the 19th century German social theorist, used to describe charismatic authority come uncannily close to the personality type we so routinely encounter in our numerous babas and matas. Charismatic authority, according to Weber, stems from the entirely personal devotion to, and personal trust in the “quality of a personality, held out to be out of the ordinary (and originally thought to have magical powers...) on account of which the person is evaluated as being gifted with supernatural or superhuman or at least out of the ordinary power not accessible to everybody, and hence as a leader”.

It is the person deemed extraordinary, with God-like abilities of insight, grace and miracle-making, who defines what is right and wrong and who gets what. Contrast this with a constitutional or legal-rational basis of authority in which a common and impersonal set of rules and laws applies to everyone equally, the charismatic person included.

The legal-rational authority has not given way to the charismatic in India—at least not yet. After all, the law did eventually (after 15 years) catch up with the guru and he is now sitting in a prison cell. At the same time, the deep and widespread reach of charismatic authority also stands exposed in the obeisance that top elected officials (including Prime Minister Narendra Modi) routinely paid to the alleged godman of Sacha Sauda and in the response of his followers who were ready to kill

and to die in his name. For his followers, Ram Rahim was not just a God-like insan, but literally God, an incarnation of Shah Mastana, who founded the Dera in 1948. Ram Rahim himself actively cultivated the image of his person as a channel through which miracles were performed, such as giving speech to the mute, eyesight to the blind, babies to childless mothers and curing AIDS and cancers.

While India is technically a country of laws, the guru culture weakens the reach of law. After all, gods and their human messengers are not bound by human laws: rape becomes “divine forgiveness” (“Pitaji’s maafi,” as the victims described it), castrations will bring you closer to God. No wonder that the Dera devotees reacted with such violent passions after the verdict, for how can you imprison God? Such “divine” lawlessness is bound to thrive in the current climate. The collusion between vote-bank politics, outsourcing of state welfare to spiritual entrepreneurs, and our cultural-religious heritage that exalts the mystic visionary, the “seer” of higher truths, over common mortals, is creating ideal conditions for the erosion of the already frayed and fragile constitutional order in the country.

To some among the Hindu Right, but also among the Left-leaning postcolonial theorists, there is nothing wrong with the balance tilting in favour of charismatic authority. On the contrary, they see it as a welcome rebalancing of India’s “colonial modernity” towards its own indigenous cultural ethos. Rakesh Sinha, a professor at Delhi University with Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh sympathies, defended the huge monetary gifts by the Haryana government to Ram Rahim as an example of “constructive engagement with the faith of millions”. BJP MP Sakshi Maharaj lashed out against the guilty verdict as an insult to Indian culture and the faith of the millions.

Such sentiments find an echo in postcolonial theory which has declared war not just against Western imperialism but also against Western or Eurocentric categories of thought. True decolonisation requires “provincialising Europe” (the title of an influential book) so that we can begin to “be what we are” and not some mimetic copies of the West. Dipesh Chakrabarty, the author of the book and the quote, insists that the “hyper-rationalism” borrowed from the missionaries and colonial administrators prevents the Indian Left from sympathetically engaging with the religion of the masses to whom their gods and ghosts and spirits are very real and meaningful. Rather than try to disenchant and secularise the popular masses, a truly democratic engagement with them would require, according to Chakrabarty and his fellow-travellers, that we step into the enchanted, magical world of the masses and adopt the conceptual framework that makes the gods real.

However democratic the intentions, this is a recipe for authoritarianism of the worst kind. The problem with gods and their messengers is that they are infallible. Divine commands cannot be challenged by evidence and logic; they can only be obeyed. Besides, the assumption that the subaltern masses will only respond to charisma of godmen and that the legal-rational regime of laws is necessarily foreign to them is nothing but a form of self-Orientalisation, for it grants that the

Indian mind is essentially spiritual and to think rationally is to be mentally colonised by the West. The growing visibility of religious movements in the public sphere and political affairs should surprise no one. We have not guarded the fence between religion and politics properly, and we are now reaping the whirlwind.

Keeping religion out of politics is not easy even when the boundary wall is well-demarcated and guarded, for the rhetoric of god and morality has a natural tendency to influence political affiliations and voting behaviour. Take the case of the United States, a country with the strictest separation of the two spheres. There are laws in the U.S. (notably the Johnson Amendment of 1954) that prohibit tax-exempt organisations—which includes all religious institutions—from directly or indirectly supporting or opposing any candidate for elective public office. The law did not stop evangelical preachers like Jerry Falwell from openly supporting Donald Trump in the last election. Nearly three-fourths of white evangelical Christians voted for Trump, taking him to the White House. Now that he is President, Trump has signed an executive order that aims to get rid of the Johnson Amendment. It is not clear if he will succeed in this goal, for there is a lot of resistance—even among the mainstream churches themselves—to weakening the wall between the church and the state in the U.S.

Religion and Indian secularism

In India, secularism never recognised such a boundary wall in the first place. We have no laws that restrict what religious bodies can say and do when it comes to political advocacy. On the contrary, aspirants for elected office openly court religious bodies, donning the appropriate attire, touching the feet of the “holies” and participating in ritual prayers. The godmen for their part—even actors playing gods on TV or films!—use their divine auras to win political offices.

All such mixing up of two spheres is perfectly within the law in India. Indian secularism is not premised on a wall of separation but only on equal treatment to all religions: as long as all religions are theoretically allowed to jump into politics, and none is singled out for special treatment, everything goes. We don't have an American-style First Amendment that disallows the state from entangling itself with matters of faith, and vice versa. But still, there are some things we can do. If we cannot regulate speech that crosses boundaries between politics and religion, can we not at least regulate the flow of money changing hands between the two spheres? We cannot stop politicians from courting the godmen, but why must we allow them to raid the public treasury to enrich the babas of their choice?

Recall that earlier this year, Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekhara Rao happily took out five and a half crore rupees from the public exchequer to make a gift of gold to the Tirumala temple. The Rs.1 crore or so that the Haryana government has gifted to Dera Sacha Sauda since it came to power is small potatoes in comparison. This is only the cash payment: there are hardly any public records of the grant of lands and other legal/administrative privileges (like setting aside

environmental laws to let mega events sponsored by religious bodies, accreditation of religious universities and colleges).

What law in the Constitution prevents us from regulating the money nexus? There has been much talk of anti-corruption laws. Are politically motivated gifts to religious bodies not a form of corruption? Why should they not be regulated and brought under control? We must learn some lessons from the Dera Sacha Sauda fiasco. Otherwise, let us all get ready for many more Panchkulas.

<http://www.frontline.in/the-nation/godmens-own-country/article9855129.ece>

Courtesy: Frontline

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In the Name of Faith

Meera Nanda

At one level, the arrest of Asaram is a rather humdrum, same-old story. One more godman has fallen from grace. So, what is new under the sun? Aren't we used to discovering the clay feet of our sadhu saints? Perhaps George Orwell was on to something when he said that "saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent", for no all-too-human godman can ever live up to the qualities of godliness. Perhaps the wise course to take is to reflect upon the tragedy of overweening human ambition of these fallen gurus and move on.

Yet, if one pauses to think about it, Asaram's arrest is not just a matter of one more godman's personal failings. Rather, this episode dramatises the thin line between faith and blind faith, and the near complete merger of faith, politics and money in contemporary Indian society.

Asaram's alleged rape of a 16-year-old girl is proof—if more proof is needed—why Narendra Dabholkar's struggle against superstitious beliefs and practices is indeed the need of the hour. The young girl was brought to the guru for an exorcism, of all things. From the revelations that are trickling in, it appears that this girl and her parents were made to believe by Asaram's associates that she had been possessed by evil spirits which the guru had the ability to drive out. This kind of *andh shraddha*, or blind faith, which our godmen so routinely encourage and exploit, is precisely what Dabholkar and his Maharashtra Andhshraddha Nirmulan Samiti were fighting against, a fight that cost him his life.

Asaram's case is also proof—if more proof is needed—that a state-temple-corporate complex is always and everywhere at work in India. Most of the times, it lies hidden in plain sight: we are so used to the sight of our elected representatives and the pillars of civil society—from prominent scientists, business tycoons to Bollywood superstars—prostrating themselves before gods and godmen that we do not notice how smoothly faith, politics and money blend into one another. It is when the godmen behave badly (as in Asaram's case), or when they fall foul of the powers-that-be

(as happened to Baba Ramdev after his anti-corruption rally last year), that the veil is lifted. It is on occasions like these that we see what has been lying under our noses all along, namely, the state-temple-corporate complex.

Narendra Modi and other political leaders may want to distance themselves from the fallen godman for strategic reasons. But it is no secret that Asaram was treated as the de facto *rajguru* in Gujarat under both BJP and Congress governments. Indeed, when you examine the record closely, it is clear that Asaram's hugely profitable empire of ashrams, gurukuls and schools was built up with the largesse of land given by the state as grant (which he later expanded through encroachment) and as private donations from the wealthy Sindhi-Marwari community. His political connections created a protective shield around him, immunising him from many allegations of crimes (including murder of children) and misdemeanours. The godman could literally get away with murder. Asaram, of course, is hardly alone in using his political clout to amass a fortune. Behind every successful godman in India today stands a cluster of powerful politicians with free access to the public assets and the machinery of the state. Once launched, the successful gurus build business empires, which attract other corporate interests, especially those with interests in the burgeoning market in education and tourism.

Under the neoliberal regime that India put in place to attract private capital, both global and indigenous, it has become easier than ever before to funnel public money and public assets into religion-cum-business empires. Often all that is needed is an authorisation for a change in land use (from agricultural to institutional or commercial) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) or the State legislature conferring the status of a "university" on a teaching shop set up by a guru's trust under the pretext of imparting "value-based" education. The neoliberal mantra of public-private partnerships has benefited religious entrepreneurs as much as any other corporate interests. The difference is that the aura of holiness and the layers of *shraddha* and *andh shraddha* protect the former from any serious inquiry, let alone a challenge.

Until recently, State governments, especially in BJP-led States, were falling over each other to offer public land to Swami Ramdev to set up subsidiaries of Patanjali Yogpeeth, his flagship ashram-cum-ayurvedic hospital in Haridwar, Uttarakhand. Uttarakhand conferred the status of a "university" on Ramdev's ashram and Haryana recognised the gurukul set up by the baba. These are fee-charging, for-profit teaching shops, not charities, though perhaps they get tax-breaks as charities. Ramdev's government-sponsored ayurvedic formulary has made millions selling drugs of dubious safety and efficacy, while Aastha, the TV channel he owns through his proxies, has raked in huge profits. In their take-off stage, these businesses were, in part, subsidised by wealthy donors in India and abroad. Once the physical assets are in place, subsidiary government agencies and corporate interests step in to develop infrastructure such as roads, hotels and resorts and run luxury buses.

This triangular relationship between the state, the peddlers of "ancient values" of Hindu sanskriti and private money has become the standard operating model adopted by nearly all brandname

gurus. It makes no difference if the State in question is “secular”, as States ruled by the Congress and the various regional parties claim to be, or is allied with the Hindu nationalists.

Ashram on leased land

Take, for example, the case of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who has constructed the headquarters of his Art of Living (AOL) ashram on land leased to him for 99 years by the State of Karnataka. The corporate support of AOL from Infosys and other Bangalore-based software companies is well known. But, wait, there is more: AOL got a land grant of 200 acres (one acre is 0.4 hectare) from the State of Odisha, where a new university offering “modern teaching with ancient values” started operations last year. The same business model was adopted by Madhya Pradesh, which honoured its native son, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, with a land-grant university. (My book, *The God Market*, provides evidence of the extensive state involvement in these cases, as it does for Baba Ramdev as well. I have only gathered the publicly available evidence and connected the dots between the active partners involved—the gurus and their political and corporate backers.)

Such state subsidies to gurus are over and above the direct subsidies many State governments provide for paying the salaries of temple priests, covering the cost of temple renovation, conducting pujas on behalf of those who cannot afford them, and setting up Vedic *pathshalas*, where students learn *karma kanda*, or priest craft. Perhaps the biggest indirect subsidy temples get from the state is through tourism. New “pilgrimage circuits” are created by States with grants from the Central government. Indeed, it is not uncommon for State tourism departments, in collusion with temple management committees, to invent *prachin itithas* (ancient history) for the temples they want to promote, to sponsor cultural traditions associated with religious festivals (the spate of state-sponsored Navratri and Makar Sankranti celebrations in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, for example) or to invent brand new traditions altogether (the golden cart processions in the Meenakshi temple in Madurai, the staging of the “celestial” lights in the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, for example).

The open diversion of public funds and assets into religious institutions of Hindus (and of minority faiths as well, depending upon political calculations) is bad enough. But the damage the collusion of state and religions does to the cultural habitat of civil society cannot be measured in rupees alone. The state-temple-corporate complex is grounded in the shared belief in gods and a shared blind faith in gods’ sales representatives here on the earth.

Faith-based nexus

When our elected representatives, policymakers and state functionaries approach the religious establishment as *devotees*, rather than as officials of a secular state with a constitutional mandate to create a secular public culture, what we get is a culture seeped in a disregard for the law, and a culture that protects irrational beliefs from critical scrutiny.

Take the case of the senior police officer D.G. Vanzara, charged with staging fake encounters in Gujarat. One of such encounters took the life of Ishrat Jahan, 19, and three others. In a letter of

resignation written from Sabarmati Central Prison where he is lodged, Vanzara declared Narendra Modi to be his “God” and none other than Asaram to be his “guru”. It appears that his resignation was provoked by the fact that his “God” failed to protect his “guru”. The close entanglement of a law enforcement officer with the Hindu nationalist agenda of Modi on the one hand and with the godman on the other is obvious. The irony is that the “spirituality” he got from his guru was uncontaminated by any ethical considerations against killing innocents in fake encounters. It is indeed sobering to think how many Vanzara-type law enforcers are out there who revere Asaram-type gurus who openly prey upon their devotees. As long as this faith-based nexus is in place, what hope can one reasonably have that lawbreakers will be punished and justice will be done, at least in those cases where the godmen themselves are implicated in the crimes being investigated?

Even more damaging is the state protection that irrational beliefs and damaging religious practices get when the powers that be approach religious authorities on bent knees and with folded hands. A case in point is Lalu Prasad’s recent visit to the ashram of the ‘tantric’ Vibhuti Narayan *aka* Pagla Baba in Uttar Pradesh’s Mirzapur district, where he conducted a fairly elaborate prayer.

It is well known that many of the tantric beliefs involve paranormal and occult powers for which there is no scientific evidence whatsoever. Indeed, the *bhuta pretas* that Asaram was promising to exorcise from the young girl he is alleged to have raped are very much a part of the tantric belief system. So ask yourself this question: will Lalu Prasad use his political clout to promote his “god” or will he promote values of critical thinking which question the existence of *bhuta preta*? We all know the answer.

A law against superstition?

What is to be done? Can a law against superstition—the kind that Dabholkar and his associates fought so long and hard for—help? Could such a law have prevented the latest horror story that is reported to have taken place in Asaram’s ashram?

Crimes like rape and murder, of course, do not need any new laws. They only require a more stringent and thorough prosecution of the alleged criminals without the fear of god-like powers of either the godmen or their political godfathers.

But what if there were to be a law that prevents any *public* discourses, advertisements and/or demonstrations by anyone, regardless of which faith or tradition he/she belonged to, about their ability to expel evil spirits, or to bring about miracles that defy all the known laws of physics and biology, or to provide cures for diseases with no known cures as yet? Imagine also that such a law were enacted at the national level, with each State mandated to put it into practice. Let us also imagine—highly improbable though it is—that this law is applied stringently and with no fear or favour. (Our hypothetical law is modelled after the law that had been pending in the Maharashtra State legislature for many years, and was passed as an ordinance following the murder of Dabholkar.)

Could such a law have prevented the rape and other crimes that allegedly happened in Asaram's ashram?

The answer has to be a qualified "yes". Such a law could have prevented someone like Asaram from claiming god-like abilities in the first place. It would not, of course, make crimes disappear, as most rapes and murders do not require the cover of faith. But such a law would make it harder for faith to provide cover for crimes, frauds and other misdemeanours.

Even more important, such a law can prevent the corruption of the public discourse that goes on day and night when alleged godmen instil blind faith in occult powers and phenomena that are entirely without any basis in the facts of nature as we know them.

Will such a law deprive people of their constitutional right to freely practice the faith of their choice, as the civil libertarians fear? Is a law against *superstition* really a law against *religion itself*, as the conservative forces aligned against Dabholkar's initiative have asserted?

The right to believe and practise one's faith is a precious right that must not be infringed upon. On that there is no debate whatsoever. But the question really is this: does the freedom of religion include the freedom to profess, encourage and profit from superstition? Where does religion end and superstition begin? Or, are the conservative critics of an anti-superstition Bill right in assuming that religion cannot exist without superstition?

Those who fear that such a law will deprive Indian citizens of their freedom of conscience and free profession and practice of religion ought to read the Constitution carefully. Freedom of religion in the Constitution is *subordinate* to the Fundamental Rights of citizens. That means the state reserves the right to regulate or restrict any "economic, financial, political or *other secular activity that may be associated with religious practice*" if that activity can be shown to contradict "the norms of public order, morality, health and other provisions of this Part" ("this Part" refers to Part III of the Constitution which enumerates the Fundamental Rights of citizens). One would think that *curing* someone of mental stress falsely attributed to possession by evil spirits, as Asaram was claiming to do, legitimately constitutes a "secular activity associated with religious practice". There is no reason why the state cannot regulate it in the interest of protecting people's fundamental interests in life and liberty.

Under the Constitution, the Indian state not only has the authority, but is in fact *duty-bound*, to curb those secular activities associated with religious practices that it deems contrary to the other fundamental rights of the citizens. Cultivation of a scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform is indeed one of the Fundamental Duties of every citizen of India, as enshrined in Article 51A (h) of the Constitution inserted by the Constitution 42nd Amendment during the Emergency in 1977. The Supreme Court has, in a few cases, accepted the principle that as these duties are obligatory on citizens, the State should also observe them.

Those who find the prospect of such regulation an unbearable restriction on their faith have some soul-searching to do. Is their faith so fragile that it stands or falls with irrational, superstitious and harmful practices? Is it not the duty of those who claim to uphold the faith to see to it that their faith tradition cleanses itself of outmoded beliefs and irrational ways of knowing?

All said and done, there is nothing more important than to carry on with the struggle against blind faith that Dabholkar gave his life for. Commitment to a scientific temper and critical thinking is the only weapon we have against the peddlers of blind faith and their political enablers.

<http://www.frontline.in/cover-story/in-the-name-of-faith/article5137396.ece>

Courtesy: Frontline

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Panacea at a Price

Ravi Sharma

He is the guru who gave himself a double prefix and was named one of the “Seven Most Powerful People in India” by Forbes magazine in 2009. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar commands a mighty financial and spiritual empire—The Art of Living (AOL) —that has grown and continues to grow exponentially ever since he founded it, rather quietly, on Bengaluru’s outskirts, circa 1981. The name of the organisation he started was perhaps inspired by the title of a book called *The Science of Being and Art of Living* written in 1963 by his guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, whom he abruptly left in 1980.

Today, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has a global presence: there are over 10,000 centres across 156 countries and more than 370 million people have been “touched” by any one of his many programmes that “provide techniques and tools to live a deeper, more joyous life”. He has a following that can rival any godman’s, although it is restricted to the middle- and upper-class educated sections of society.

His Bangalore International Centre on Kanakapura Road alone is spread over 100 acres (40 hectares), he runs a 244-bed ayurveda hospital, and his Sri Sri Tattva facility manufactures ayurvedic and proprietary medicines, cosmetics and food products. AOL’s India budget alone is around Rs 8 crore a month, which, a spokesperson said, “is mostly allocated for the running of the 425 free schools in tribal and rural areas and the 25,000 full-time staff and instructors”.

There is also a maze of sister organisations such as the International Association for Human Values, Ved Vignan Maha Vidya Peeth, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Vidya Mandir, Vyakti Vikas Kendra India, Sri Sri Rural Development Program and the Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences and Technology Trust, among others, all of which have been established to “promote and support courses promulgated by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and the AOL organisation worldwide”.

According to reports, the global annual turnover of the organisation is in excess of Rs.1,000 crore. AOL is also active in agriculture, where it is engaged in educating farmers on the benefits of saving native seeds, and river rejuvenation.

AOL philosophy

“Clarity in mind, purity in heart and sincerity in action. This is our formula. We follow yoga Vedanta as a philosophy and service as our main motivation goal,” he told *Frontline* during a 30-minute interaction at his centre in Bengaluru.

“Religion is like the skin, spirituality is the banana” is a famous quote of his. But going beyond spirituality, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has been actively involved in political and peace negotiations, be it with militants in the Northeast or separatists in the Kashmir Valley or in Ivory Coast and in Sri Lanka. He even attempted to get Colombian rebels to surrender. He has initiated rehabilitation training for over seven lakh prison inmates. “I see inside every culprit there is a victim crying for help; this yoga Vedanta, this knowledge, has the power to transform,” he told *Frontline*.

But should a person like him, who preaches and swears by spirituality, be involved in matters of state? “Yes, certainly,” he said. “Gurujis are in touch with common men every day. I am in touch with 2,500 to 3,000 people on a normal day and 30,000-40,000 people on occasions and weekends. We hear their problems and their issues. At times we bring these issues to the notice of the people in authority. It is our duty. If there is corruption, water issues, deforestation, we have to take an active role. Activism is part of our duties. When you are in activism you have to communicate what you feel is just and what you feel is the need of the people to the people concerned. Some in authority are receptive, some are not. And it is not party-wise. It depends on the individuals. Some in authority are quite sensitive, sincere. Some of our appeals fall on deaf ears. Swamis in the past too were part of the social system. They started *gurukuls*. They were the ones who brought in ayurveda. Adi Sankara [the 8th century philosopher and theologian who consolidated the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta] travelled the length and breadth of the country. He was a *sanyasi*. Yes he walked. But if in those days there was air travel he would have used air travel (laughs). He would not have said: ‘No I won’t go by air travel, I’ll walk.’ They used whatever means of transportation was available.”

What Sri Sri Ravi Shankar did not mention was that gurujis of all hues need to be in politics. They need to hobnob with politicians and the powers that be for their own well-being and protection. And political patronage for Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has been plentiful. He has been quoted as saying that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been “bashed unjustly for years and years”. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was also present at Rashtrapati Bhavan in 2014 when Modi was sworn in as Prime Minister. And a posse of BJP heavyweights, including Modi, a number of his Cabinet colleagues such as Finance Minister Arun Jaitley and the then Minister for Urban Development M. Venkaiah Naidu, BJP president Amit Shah and Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan, all attended AOL’s three-day World Culture Festival in Delhi in March 2016, an event which caused irreparable

damage to the ecologically fragile Yamuna floodplains, according to the National Green Tribunal (see box).

Early years

Born into a Tamil Iyer family in 1956 to Visalakshi and R.S. Venkat Ratnam, Ravi Shankar had his early initiation, according to M.N. Chakravarti, a former journalist and teacher of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation (TM), when he attended a TM class in Melkote in Karnataka as a 20-year-old.

Speaking to *Frontline*, Chakravarti said he and Ravi Shankar even travelled to Mahesh Yogi's ashram in Rishikesh where they were roommates for nearly six months. They naturally got to know each other well, visiting each other's houses in Bengaluru often.

According to Chakravarti, Ravi Shankar's father was an extremely ambitious man who "pushed his son to accept and take up a role he was not really interested in". "His father was a sort of star mom. He would keep pushing Ravi. Anyway Ravi was destined to take it up and eventually get millions of followers too."

By 1977 he had become a staunch disciple of Mahesh Yogi, organising conferences on Vedic science and ayurveda and yagnas for him. He accompanied Mahesh Yogi, flying to various destinations, and was made in charge of the Maharishi's Institute of Vedic and Management Sciences in Bhopal. Whether he considered himself to be the Maharishi's successor is in the realm of conjecture. Suddenly, in 1980, he left Mahesh Yogi's institute—although he has always maintained that he left of his own volition, knowledgeable sources said he was sent away and that when Mahesh Yogi got to know that he had started his own ashram in Bengaluru, he even refused to speak to his former disciple.

The story is that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar had divulged, albeit inadvertently, sensitive information to an American "devotee" (who, it was later discovered, was an intelligence operative trying to ferret out information on Mahesh Yogi's ashram and activities) he had befriended at the institute.

Both the American agent and Ravi Shankar were sent out on some trumped-up charges involving voucher payments. In 1982, Ravi Shankar undertook a 10-day period of silence in Shimoga (Shivamogga) in Karnataka and emerged with the Sudarshan Kriya®, a powerful breathing technique that became the centrepiece of Art of Living courses. Much to the chagrin of even some of his most ardent supporters and followers, he later patented it. To many of his then most ardent followers, this was another step in the "commercialisation of spirituality".

Charges and criticisms

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's critics question the need to charge a fee for teaching a breathing technique. The rationalist Narendra Nayak said: "Do you have to pay to learn to breathe? Respiration governs several processes of the body. It is basically hyperventilation—when you pant like a dog, you lose carbon dioxide, it brings the pH levels up, respiratory alkalosis occurs, there is a decrease in

ionised calcium and this results in a tingly feeling that is mistaken for nirvana. People like him perpetrate their hypocrisies but are the icons of the great Indian middle class.”

Besides disbelievers, a number of former AOL believers have also been critical of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and the goings-on at AOL. Their charges range from nepotism and being pressured incessantly to organise successful events “come what may” with a certain number of paid participants to teachers being left stranded when they become a liability (since they have no legal contract, they are helpless).

There are also charges that donations and land meant for welfare projects are used to build the AOL corporate and the Sumeru group of companies, which is owned by his nephews Arvind Varchaswi and Ajay Tejasvi and their father Narasimhan.

Besides, there are allegations of financial irregularities in the organisation and acquisition of land by means fair or foul. According to some former believers, AOL falsely claims that some techniques were discovered by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

A retired official told *Frontline* that a few years ago he had been pressured by local goons to sell his 15-acre farm situated in the vicinity of the AOL ashram in Bengaluru. Although he had developed the land spending over Rs.1.25 crore, he was offered only Rs.33 lakh.

Under pressure after his fencing was repeatedly broken and the sprinkler systems were destroyed, he finally sold it for less than half of what he had invested on it. A few years later he realised that the same land was under the control of AOL. When he met Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, he was told: “That is your land. Come do seva.”

Blogs such as Confessions of a Guruholic (aka Klim’s Blog), Beyond the Art of Living (aka Skywalker’s Blog), Further Beyond the Art of Living and Leaving the Art of Living have published a litany of charges. In 2010, AOL complained initially in India and then in the United States asking that handwritten notes on the teaching of Sudarshan Kriya uploaded by bloggers be deleted.

AOL U.S. also subpoenaed Google and WordPress to reveal the identities of the bloggers in order to prosecute them for defamation, copyright breaches, trade libel and disclosure of trade secrets. Bloggers later called the Kriya notes a mix of cult mythology and self-explanatory banalities. In a ruling by the U.S. District Court, Northern District of California (San Jose division) in 2012, AOL got two blogs removed but nobody’s identity was disclosed.

Expensive learning

Learning spirituality and yoga from AOL is expensive. The basic programme designed for beginners, the three day ‘Happiness Program’, which includes “powerful breathing techniques and wisdom that can change your life, guided relaxation through breathing, light yoga and stretching and insights into the nature of the mind, and guided meditation”, costs Rs.5,300 (on a twin sharing basis), while courses for the already initiated are twice as expensive. Overseas it costs even more. In the U.S., where over 200 cities host AOL courses, events and weekly follow-ups, the Sri Sri

Yoga, Art of Silence, Sahaj Samadhi Meditation or the Panchakarma Cleanse, can set you back anywhere between \$350 and \$2,000.

Frontline had a look into the financial statements of a handful of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar-inspired organisations such as the Ved Vignan Maha Vidya Peeth, the Art of Living Foundation and a few other affiliate entities registered in the U.S. and the United Kingdom. (The AOL entities in the U.S. and the U.K. are just the tip of the iceberg as AOL, as Sri Sri Ravi Shankar himself proudly stated, has a presence in 156 countries.)

According to Nonprofit Explorer, a body that researches tax-exempt organisations in the U.S., the Ved Vigyan Maha Vidya Peeth clocked a net income of \$1,943,943 for the fiscal year ended December 2015; its total revenue was \$4,683,472 and functional expenses totalled \$2,739,529. The entity operates from Nashua, New Hampshire, and has been tax exempt since 1994, being classified under Personal Social Services (Human Services-Multipurpose and Other).

Contributions totalled \$1,021,226 (21.8 per cent of total revenue) and programme services brought in \$2,964,352 (63.3 per cent), while investment income amounted to \$6,67,894 (14.3per cent) and rental property income \$30,000 (6 per cent). Executive compensation accounted for \$2,20,000 while other salaries and wages totalled \$107,761.

The entity had net assets worth \$20,660,371, with \$20,834,597 in total assets and \$174,226 in total liabilities. .

The Art of Living Foundation, headquartered in Santa Barbara, California, has been tax-exempt since 1995. For the fiscal year ended 2015, its net income was \$1,441,251, with total revenue at \$5,230,018 and functional expenses at \$3,788,767. The notable sources of revenue were contributions, which brought in \$1,987,218 (38 per cent) and programme services, which totalled \$3,001,132 (57.4 per cent). Salaries and wages accounted for \$5,87,828. The foundation's net assets were \$16,159,480, with total assets at \$16,406,500 and total liabilities at \$247,020.

The Art of Living Health and Education Trust is another non-profit organisation based in the U.S. Incorporated in 2008, the trust has Anurag Jain as its president and Ajay Tejaswi as its secretary. Created to “fund programmes that foster, promote, and support quality healthcare and value-integrated education around the world”, it is located in Washington and has been tax-exempt since 2009. The trust's total revenue in the fiscal ended December 2015 was \$131,353, while total functional expenses were \$175,981. Revenue came purely from contributions.

Yet another U.S.-based organisation is the International Association for Human Values (IAHV), which is headquartered at Washington and has been tax-exempt since 2000. For the fiscal ended December 2015 the total revenue was \$2,265,730, total functional expenses \$1,569,410 and net income \$696,320. Contributions accounted for \$1,361,923 (60.1 per cent) and programme services

\$9,03,632 (39.9 per cent). Salaries and wages accounted for \$514,728. The net assets stood at \$2,088,019, with total assets at \$2,142,193 and total liabilities at \$54,174.

The Art of Living Foundation (U.K.), which is registered as a charity and has its registered office in Middlesex, according to the statement of accounts with the Companies House (the U.K.'s registrar of companies), clocked £185,645 in revenue for the financial year ended March 2016, most of which came from courses.

Expenditure amounted to £236,659, resulting in a loss of £51,014

<http://www.frontline.in/the-nation/panacea-at-a-price/article9874134.ece>

Courtesy: Frontline

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The Paradox in Tamil Nadu

Ilangoan Rajsekharan

His flamboyance would have easily earned him stardom in Bollywood; his articulation and attitude would have made him the first choice for corporate head honcho. The 60-year-old Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev—the tall, dapper mystic with flowing white beard, often dressed in a loose kurta over a dhoti, a custom-made shawl thrown carelessly across the shoulder and a turban tied firmly around his head—skilfully blends spiritualism with business and social activism.

Whether at the multicore Isha Yoga Centre's event where he teaches yoga and "inner engineering" or at the various fora where he speaks on economic and social issues, Jaggi Vasudev keeps his audience, who hang on to his every word, in thrall. A hefty fee, euphemistically termed as donation, is charged for the Isha Foundation's events, whose opulence inspires awe and wonder. Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended one such function held at the Isha Yoga Centre at Velliangiri near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

Currently, Jaggi Vasudev is on a mission, a month-long programme on inter-linking rivers, "Rally for Rivers". He launched it on September 3, driving the fuel-guzzling Mercedes Benz G63 AMG himself, from Kanyakumari to Haridwar. "Rivers are veins to earth," he said.

There are several spiritual gurus and godmen in Tamil Nadu, a State known for the self-respect movement which strongly advocated rationalism and atheism. What perplexes rationalists is how the people of the Dravidian heartland, where social reformists such as "Periyar" E.V. Ramasamy lived and preached rational thinking, could be home to men who sell spirituality for money with their illogical claims.

Sociologists point out that people's unflinching religiosity and power-centric politics mix seamlessly in the State. Whenever these godmen appear in public, even powerful people pay their obeisance to them. Ordinary people believe that they can find remedies for illnesses and misfortunes through

the “godmen”. “When people experience so much dissonance around them, they deify these godmen, who have no inhibitions in wearing the mantle of divinity. Poverty, ignorance, fear and superstitions help these so-called spiritual leaders to continue their acts of fraud,” says Ramu Manivannan, Head of the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Madras in Chennai. “Instant salvation and eternal bliss are promised here,” he says.

These spiritual gurus do not confine themselves to what constitutes sainthood in the traditional sense. They build hospices, plant saplings, run schools and build temples, among other things and turn their institutions into billion-dollar corporate entities on the way to emerging as alternative power centres. Their larger-than-life images are far removed from institutionalised orthodoxy.

Image construction

Ramu Manivannan attributes this trait of image construction to the Tamil people’s inherent love for personality worship. “It is a kind of monism that reduces all phenomena to one principle or that reality is a unitary organic whole. Dravidian parties constructed the idea of charismatic leader and personality through popular mediums and MGR [M.G. Ramachandran] and Jayalalithaa are its products,” he points out.

Nithyananda and the late Premananda belong to a different breed of godmen, having constructed their fiefdoms on the basis of sleaze and “miracles”. They lack the sophistication of a Jaggi Vasudev and they cater to the “spiritual needs” of lesser mortals. There is a third set of spiritual leaders, the pontiffs of centuries-old monastic institutions such as the Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt of Kancheepuram headed by Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal, the Vaishnavite mutts in Srirangam, Nanguneri and Sriperumbudur, and the Saivite adheenams in Madurai, Tiruvaduthurai and Kundrakudi.

Sri Jayendra Saraswathi was an accused in the Sankararaman murder case. Sankararaman was murdered inside the Varadarajaperumal temple in Kancheepuram on September 3, 2004. The pontiff was arrested on November 11, 2004. After a prolonged trial, a Puducherry court, where the case was transferred from Chengalpattu in Tamil Nadu, acquitted the seer in November 2013. The Puducherry government did not prefer an appeal against the verdict. However, the pontiff seems to be in trouble today since the demand for re-opening the case has begun to gain momentum.

D. Ravikumar, writer and senior functionary of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), says the Bhakthi cult is the mainstay of these godmen. “In Tamil Nadu, where the anti-Brahmin rhetoric is high, the State and its leaders tacitly promote non-Brahmin godmen, primarily for those living outside the margins of Hindutva’s caste codification, before taking up the administration of the big ‘Vedic’ temples under its control.”

This perhaps explains the rationale behind the presence of a horde of godmen with nomenclatures such as “Beer Samiyar”, “Suruttu [cigar-smoking] Samiyar”, “Vibhuthi [holy ash] Samiyar”, and “Sudukattu [graveyard] Samiyar”. “These men cater to the needs of those who live below the poverty line,” says A. Marx, a social activist-cum-writer.

Ramu Manivannan says atheism propagated by the Dravidian movement has failed because of its high-pitched rhetoric against Brahminism. “But atheism, to promote reason in public domain and social justice, has survived. The Dravidian movement preached atheism but did more to raise political awareness. Its success in relation to Hinduism has to be seen within the specific context of its resistance to Manusmriti’s oppressive social structure,” he says.

Bangaru Adigalar

The Adi Parasakthi Siddhar Peedam at Melmaruvathur near Chennai is run by a person belonging to a Backward Caste. Bangaru Adigalar, the head of the peedam, began his career in spirituality in a humble way. Sources in Melmaruvathur told *Frontline* that he converted a small hut into a temple dedicated to Adi Parasakthi when he was 25 years old. The 76-year-old spiritual leader is considered a “Poorna Avatar” (total reincarnation).

Melmaruvathur, which was a village along the Chennai-Tiruchi Highway, has been transformed into a bustling township with a string of educational institutions, hospitals and charity homes, and the small temple attracting several thousands of devotees every day, all managed by the trust owned by Adigalar, also called ‘Amma’ (mother) by his devotees, and his family. “In fact, his spiritual empire faced controversies, including allegations of financial irregularities and Income Tax department investigations. His son is emerging as the heir apparent,” says a professor who once worked in one of the colleges in Melmaruvathur.

“The trait of showing impeccable loyalty to their leaders has been thoroughly exploited not only in politics but in the realm of faith too,” says Marx. He wonders how the progressive and literate Tamil society could be so irrational. “There is nothing holy about this,” he adds.

Literacy, Ramu Manivannan clarifies, is not an antidote to religion though reasoning. “Religion is not only about beliefs.... All literates are not reason-oriented, they are as superstitious and god-fearing as illiterates. Dravidian ideology may be based on reason but as a movement it had to invent false hopes. People all over the world follow their spirit, and spurious godmen are part of the larger reality,” he says.

The godmen wield enormous clout with politicians and they have emerged as alternative power centres. Whenever rationalists, activists or victims attempt to expose them, the spiritual leaders resort to intimidation. Activists allege violation of environment protection rules by the Isha Yoga Centre situated at the foothills of the Western Ghats and say the centre has grabbed vast tracts of land from tribal people and from reserve forests and encroached upon an elephant corridor. The Salem-based environmental activist Piyush Sethia, who led a fact-finding mission to the site where top educational institutions and private resorts jostle for space, told *Frontline* that nothing was legal about these mega constructions. “The elephant corridor, through which the elephants from the mountains migrate in search of water and fodder, has been totally blocked,” he says.

M. Siva, one of the conveners of the Velliangiri Hills Tribals Protection Society in Coimbatore, says they have been fighting a war against many of these institutions—spiritual, educational and

recreational—which are destroying the fragile ecology of the Western Ghats. “They are creating a concrete jungle in this ecologically sensitive pocket, devouring streams and lakes and destroying the elephant corridor that opens up here,” he says. As per the Elephant Task Force report in 2004, the Coimbatore Forest Division has the maximum number of elephants living in a minimum area of land.

He says that of the 566 square-kilometre Coimbatore Forest Division, 482 sq km has been classified as elephant forests. About 330 elephants use this sector, which has been brought under the Hill Area Conservation Authority (HACA). “But rules are followed more in the breach here. In the past decade, 120 elephants and 130 people have lost their lives in the Coimbatore Forest Division alone. It has become a man-animal conflict zone,” he says.

The story of Nithyananda

A diploma holder from the Industrial Training Institute in Tiruvannamalai, a place renowned for sages such as Ramana Maharishi and Seshadri Swamigal, Nithyananda, born A. Rajasekaran in a non-Brahmin family, chose to follow the path of Swami Premananda, the fallen godman of the 1990s, who died in prison while serving a double life sentence for rape and murder.

Nithyananda’s former disciple K. Lenin says: “He conditions you psychologically and then theologically, slowly brainwashes you and makes you believe that he is the saviour. He ordains himself as the ‘paramahansa’ [supreme]. He, like any other guru, conducts classes on meditation and delivers discourses. The display of opulence makes you vulnerable and converts you into his vassal and later a victim like me.”

Lenin joined Nithyananda Dhyanaapeetam when he was 30 years old, and was given the spiritual name “Sri Nithya Dharmananda”. He went on to emerge as Nithyananda’s trusted disciple. A native of Attur in Salem district, Lenin ran the ashram’s publication section, which raked in crores of rupees.

“He [Nithyananda] identifies his victims, destroys the self in them,” Lenin says. He chooses “his victims” carefully and employs his acts in such a way that by the time the gullible ones realise it, it would be too late to extricate themselves from the intricate web of deceit. He removes refinement from the orthodoxy and instils negativity in the minds of his followers, mostly women and adolescent girls. He makes them sign “non-disclosure agreements” (to discourage sharing of information about the activities in the ashram to outsiders), Lenin alleges. “Even tantric sex is performed there,” he says.

A woman who did not wish to be identified says: “He made us give a part of ourselves to him in our divine pursuit to eternity.” Another woman disciple alleged that Nithyananda had raped her. When Lenin supported her, both of them were expelled from the cult. Subsequently, some video clips showing Nithyananda and a woman actor together were leaked to the media. This shook the very foundation of Nithyananda’s multicore establishment.irate mobs damaged his properties located across Tamil Nadu after the sleaze video was beamed by a television channel.

“Cases of sexual abuse, cheating and intimidation were registered against him and are pending before the Supreme Court for which both the woman and I are facing threats.” The Supreme Court, on February 6, 2017, stayed the start of the trial against Nithyananda in the case filed in 2010, which the ashram termed as “a major conspiracy against Swami Nithyananda”. The Karnataka High Court quashed some cases filed against him in 2012. Lenin says that 44 cases have been registered against him at various places, including one in Haridwar.

“We have survived harassment by him because of the strong support we receive from a leading Chennai-based auditor and his legal firm,” he says. Nithyananda and his disciples made an attempt to take over the traditional Madurai Tirugnana Sambandar Adheenam, but local people thwarted it.

Karuppu Karuna, a Communist Party of India (Marxist) functionary and a writer in Tiruvannamalai, who supported the local people in their protest against an attempt by Nithyananda’s disciples to occupy a hillock, says he and his family faced severe intimidation and trolling for this. “We had to retaliate by organising a public protest against them.”

Karuna is not the only one to be targeted. Piyush Sethia, who uploaded a photo of Nithyananda with a woman devotee in his Facebook page, came under vituperative attack from his followers, who used multiple fake IDs to troll Piyush and his family members. “Even my daughter was dragged into it. I requested the Salem City Police to file cases under the provisions of the POSCO [Protection of Children from Sexual Offences] Act, but they refused to oblige. The Police Commissioner refused to meet me, indicating high-level connections the swamy enjoys,” he says.

The Premananda case

The story of godmen in Tamil Nadu cannot be complete without a mention of Premananda, alias Premkumar alias Ravi alias “Tiger Swami” who hailed from Sri Lanka. He fled that country during the ethnic violence in the 1980s and set up an ashram near Tiruchi.

Tales of his mystical powers spread far and wide and powerful politicians of the time began to patronise him. His close contacts with the family of Sasikala Natarajan, a close associate of the late Chief Minister Jayalalithaa (she is now in jail in connection with the disproportionate assets case) made him a very important person in 1992. But his perceived divine powers deserted him when an inmate lodged a complaint of rape against him in November 1994. Although the police were reluctant to take up the case initially, they yielded to pressure from activists and the media.

Premananda was charged with raping 13 inmates, molesting two and murdering an engineer in the ashram. Such was his impunity that a woman doctor-disciple was kept in his ashram to terminate the pregnancies of girls Premananda had raped. His victims were all Sri Lankan Tamils. The trial of Premananda ended in conviction with the Pudukottai District and Sessions judge, R. Banumathi, now a judge in the Supreme Court, sentencing him on August 20, 1997, to double life imprisonment and a fine of Rs.67.30 lakh for rape and murder.

The fall of Premananda did not deter other godmen. “Kalki” Bhagwan, born V. Vijay Kumar, in a village near Gudiyatham in Vellore district in 1949, was a clerk in the Life Insurance Corporation before “renouncing worldly comforts” to emerge as a “divine man” in the late 1990s. He established an ashram at Nehamam village in Tiruvallur district with its headquarters at Varadaipalam in Andhra Pradesh. He started preaching his “Kalki Deeksha Dharma” (Oneness Movement) and at one point reportedly commanded a following of 20 to 30 lakh devotees, in India and abroad. Since the early 2000s, rumours started doing the rounds that the cult had employed hypnosis-prompting devotion. Besides, parents began alleging that their wards were brainwashed to embrace monastic lives. Charges of extortion under the ruse of donations were also levelled. Income Tax investigations and the resultant controversies forced Kalki to retreat to attain “anantha mukthi” (mass enlightenment for humanity). He stopped public sermons and rituals.

Peddlers of spirituality and their salvation are not confined to Hinduism. Christian evangelical theologians give sermons and organise prayer festivals and congregations at which they warn of an apocalypse, “chase away” evil spirits from the possessed, and “absolve” the devotees of their sins. Some of them, like Paul Dhinakaran, who inherited his father’s massive evangelical empire Jesus Calls Ministry of Prayer, have ventured into the field of education. The group established the Karunya University, a Christian minority institution, also at the foothills of the Western Ghats near Coimbatore, which, activists claim, is mired in controversies.

Siva says: “Many institutions, such as the Isha Yoga Centre, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham University of the Amritanandamayi Math and Karunya University, are located in the eco-sensitive area. We have been fighting against them. I was even arrested on a false complaint for exposing their irregularities.” He says the harassment continues.

<http://www.frontline.in/the-nation/the-paradox-in-tamil-nadu/article9873992.ece>

Courtesy: Frontline

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Third Eye of Nirmal Baba

Yet another Baba! What is wrong with Indians? Why they waste their hard-earned money on these fraud Babas? Recently a self-styled godman and spiritual leader, Nirmal Baba is in limelight due to his public discourses and treatises on social issues as well as his Samagam in Nirmal darbar (public meetings). Nirmal Darbar is actually a televised show corresponding to each public meeting of Baba. This show is currently broadcasted by approximately 40 different channels including AXN, TV Asia, Star News, SAB TV etc. During these Darbars, Nirmal Baba makes public appearances and converses with distressed devotees who usually narrate their personal, social or financial worries, fears and doubts to him.

Nirmal Baba is an Indian spiritual guru who is popular for his programme “Third Eye Of Nirmal Baba” these days.

Nirmal Baba’s real name is Nirmaljeet Singh Narula. He was born around 1950 in a Sikh family. His family shifted to India during the partition in 1947. Nirmal Baba has an elder brother who is living in Ludhiana. He got married to the daughter of Dilip Singh Bagga in Jharkhand and has two children (son & daughter). Nirmal Baba is the brother-in-law of former speaker of Jharkhand Legislative Assembly, Inder Singh Namdharee. Mr Namdharee married Baba’s sister in 1964 when Nirmal was only 14-15 years old. After the murder of his father during his childhood, his mother sent him to Daltonganj, Jharkhand in 1970’s.

He is married to Sushma Narula. Sushma is from Jharkhand.

In 1970-71, Baba reached Medininagar and stayed there till 1981-82. He shifted to Ranchi in 1984 but returned to Delhi in the same year. Baba got a mining contract in Bahragoda (Jharkhand) in 1998-99. He set up his business in Modinagar in 1981-82, he had a brick kiln named ‘Nirmal Eent’ there. Prior to that Baba owned a cloth shop. He shut the shop after few years.

Nirmal became popular in a very less time duration. Until June 2011, his website, Nirmalbaba.com saw approximately 5,000 hits every month. Since then the number has grown four-times over. In April 2012, this number has reached over 42,000 hits per day. As per Google Tools approximately 8 lakh people visit his site, and it receives 18lakh page views! This figure is more than a lot many News Websites. He has over 3 lakh followers on Facebook. Add to this, around 42,000 followers on Twitter.

<http://matnal.com/2012/04/nirmal-baba-biography.html>

He then, advises them on those issues publicly and suggests solutions. And do you know what is the least entry fee for these meetings. You would be shocked to know that they have tickets starting from Rs. 2,000. It sounds ridiculous to my ears. Anyway, this is not the right time to get emotional. Let’s find more information about this fraud Baba.

Nirmal Baba claims that he has been blessed with third eye by the god. And to help the mankind, he organizes his public events in almost every city of India. He also offers luck for additional money. He says that by sharing earnings at the rate of 10% of total monthly earning with baba, one can get richer and luckier.

If you know about Nirmal Baba then you must have heard about his trust Nirmal Darbar. Last week, this trust came under media and legal attacks because of its allegedly fraudulent activities and for charging exorbitant sums of money from people claiming to solve their problems with the help of black magic and divine powers.

A couple from Ludhiana, Baba's home town filed a police complaint against Nirmal Baba for duping them financially. Following the media uproar and fall in popularity, Baba moved the Delhi High Court against a website called Indijobs and an unknown hubber. The court ruled in his favor and ordered for the defamatory content to be pulled down till the next hearing. It also asked to reveal the hubber's identity.

Baba had also invested the donations collected in his samagam and daswant into buying a hotel worth 30 crore in Greater Kailash area of New Delhi. He has also deposited Rs 109 crore his two bank accounts in just three months. Meanwhile, Nirmal Baba told a news channel, "I never asked people to deposit money to solve their problems. I never assured them of any magical solution to their woes."

I would request people not to waste their hard earned money on such fraud Babas. Don't forget, there are millions of orphans, widows, disabled and poor persons who can utilize your money in much better way.

Fake Facebook followers

There are two Facebook communities in the name of Nirmal Baba — one of them has approximately 13 lakh members. Though the page has not been updated since September 2011, it added 11,747 new members in April 2012; and 27,773 members in March 2012. The other facebook page in the name of Nirmal Baba has 3,53,000 members. His Facebook page was flooded with the followers and well wishers praising him and expressing their faith in Nirmal Baba. However, a thorough investigation of Nirmal Baba's Facebook page by Dailybhaskar raised many questions on his ascent to stardom.

- Several profiles of Nirmal Baba's followers appeared fake. After a thorough investigation, it was known that majority of the profiles were created at the end of March or in April's first week—the time when Nirmal Baba shot to fame and became talk of the town.
- These profiles were seen making regular comments on Baba's Facebook page and praising him for his 'magical healing'.
- The authenticity of the fake followers of Nirmal Baba on Facebook is evident in the fact that hundreds of such profiles neither have profile pictures nor cover photos.
- Dailybhaskar sent messages to a few followers and asked them to share their experience with the website. However, none of them replied.

It must be noted that a few days back Nirmal Baba was accused of hiring people to ask 'fake' questions and later telecast it to TV channels to gain propaganda mileage.

<http://abhisays.com/india/who-is-nirmal-baba.html>

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Maharashtra's 'Ram Rahim' Swami Krishna Patil: For women, his verbal abuse was 'prasad'

Santosh Wagh

At the Ratnagiri rural police station, officials are chatting, every now and then, throwing a glance at a man seated in the lock up. "Tu polisach bara hota. Babagiri bhovli na, tula (You were good as a policeman. Becoming a godman cost you, didn't it?)," one of them says, taunting him. Krishna Patil, popularly known in Ratnagiri as Swami Patil, is a former assistant sub-inspector. The 62-year-old was arrested on September 20 under the Anti-Superstition and Black Magic Act.

Until a few years ago, Patil was one of them, working as a driver in the Motor Transport Division of the Ratnagiri police. It was a job he had held since 1977. But spirituality wasn't new to him.

Born to a farmer from Mirabunder village, Ratnagiri, a young Patil would accompany his father, a bhajan singer, when he performed at the local temple's devotional gatherings. Soon, their fame spread, and they travelled to neighbouring villages to spread divine love through music.

Even after he joined the police department, Patil pursued his passion. "He would somehow manage to make time for bhajan singing after duty hours. He was devout, and played an active role in building a temple near Mandavi beach in Ratnagiri," recalls Ramesh Vasaikar, former deputy superintendent of police for whom Patil worked as driver from 1997 to 2000.

His talent was good enough for those who heard him to remember it as mesmerising. Often, devotees, lost in the lord's worship, would stand up and dance to his songs. It wasn't uncommon for him to be invited by officers from other jurisdictions to sing at satsangs held at their local temples. "The crowds that turned up to listen to Patil sing made him realise that he held sway over people. Some of them would bow spontaneously before him. Gradually, his reputation as a spiritual personality was cemented and he was growing into a popular figure in the police department," says a former colleague, requesting anonymity. "Slowly," the colleague remembers, "he was transforming from policeman into an unexpected personality who was himself overwhelmed by the support he was receiving." Over time, he began displaying palmistry skills too, and senior officers would call him over to their residence for a glimpse into their future.

Transformation is complete

It was around 2000 that his transformation into a godman was complete. Praise had turned into devotion, and visitors who earlier swayed to his bhajans now touched his feet. They'd load him with garlands, and perform the aarti for him. Soon, stories of his kripa (blessings) began circulating wildly, and Patil decided he needed to make dedicated time for his followers.

At the meetings, visitors would share their sorrows with him. Sometimes, they would plead that he find a solution. The congregation was usually held on Thursdays at a math (monastery) in Sanmitranagar area of Ratnagiri district.

Prahlad Gotad, a 43-year-old follower from Jharewadi village, and his wife had been battling depression. After four years of marriage, they had not been able to have a child. Every treatment in the book had been tried, Gotad claims. Then, they decided to approach Patil. "I told him, by God's grace, I have everything — a home, land, a job. Before I could complete the sentence, Swami interrupted me to say, but you don't have a child. My wife and I fell at his feet. He didn't know about our problem. We hadn't shared it with anyone," Gotad, an employee with Konkan Railway tells this reporter.

Patil is believed to have told Gotad that his wife would deliver a baby in nine months and nine days. "Call the child, Prasad," Patil advised. The prediction, says Gotad, was accurate down to the date of birth.

Like several of his followers fed on stories of miracles, Pandurang Kalambate says Patil once blessed a woman and predicted that her son, who had been missing for two years, would return during Ganeshotsav. His bhavishyawani came true when the boy knocked on her door during the nine-day festival.

Now, as many as 4,000 people would turn up every Thursday at the math. This didn't go down well with the locals, who gradually built the pressure for him to shift base. Shankar Kalambate, a senior citizen and ardent follower of Patil, belonged to Jharewadi, a village 21 km from Ratnagiri. He agreed to donate 21 guntha (2,125 sq m) of land to Patil and his followers for constructing a temple. It was time for him to move from Sanmitranagar to a new base in Jharewadi. This was in 2010. His followers now included senior government officials, bureaucrats, doctors, politicians and businessmen.

And then, Patil claimed to have performed a miracle only God could. A woman visited the Jharewadi math with the lifeless body of her young son. Patil, say his followers, gently inserted his index finger into the boy's mouth, and soon, the young lad was up and about. This was proof enough for Patil to now sit on a throne, and get loaded with garlands by his bhakts.

From godman to God

His garb slowly changed, and he decided he'd dress like divinity. Sometimes, he would become lord Krishna or Shiva. Chandrakant Gotad, sarpanch of Jharewadi village has been Patil's firm critic. He speaks of a renowned Shiva temple of Marleshwar in Konkan. Every year on January 14, devotees throng it to celebrate Makarsankranti and perform a marriage ceremony for the celestial couple, Shiva and Parvati.

Inspired by the tradition, Gotad says, Patil chose to do the same. He claimed he was an avatar of lord Shiva, and on the holy occasion of Makarsankranti, he would marry a woman. His followers would arrange for a bride every year. "It was like a real wedding with a baraat. No one knows what happened to those girls," Gotad says.

Anil Gotad, another Jharewadi resident, agrees with the sarpanch. "Swami Patil would conceive a new nautanki and attire every day. Sometimes, he would dress in a suit, and on other days he would turn into a saint. He would make women followers dance to vulgar songs." Videos of Patil's

antics circulating on the net stand proof. He is believed to have often showcased Michael Jackson's moves.

While his persona changed, abuse, say critics, was standard. He claimed to be an avatar of 19th century Maharashtrian saint Swami Samarth, who legend says, had a short temper. "He would not only dress like him, but also display arrogance and abuse his followers. People accepted the vulgar language as 'prasad'," says Jaywant Kalambate, a local.

By 2012, Patil had grown a large enough following to consider quitting his police department post. He sought voluntary retirement and became a full-time self-anointed godman. Soon, Jharewadi's residents too found him a nuisance. "He would give sermons on loudspeaker, abuse his devotees in public, his followers would cause traffic jams and spread filth in the surrounding area," says Chandrakant Gotad. He calls the miracles hearsay. "His followers never allowed a phone or camera into the monastery." Ironically, his fame cost him. Videos of aartis — secretly shot on spy cameras — were often accompanied by proof of abuse.

In September 20, 2017, a female follower who visited Patil at the Jharewadi math with her husband was verbally abused. She went straight to the local police station and lodged a complaint. But, Patil managed to acquire bail in the case. For his followers, his offensive behaviour was simply 'swamiji's leela'.

And then came an incident that may have unfolded thousands of miles away in Haryana, but it had an impact on Patil. On August 28, Dera Sacha Sauda chief Ram Rahim was convicted of rape and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. The man once considered invincible was now a petty prisoner pleading for mercy.

The cry against superstition grew stronger across the country, training the spotlight on others like Patil. Notorious, he could not escape the glare of the media, who began running stories of his misdemeanors. When organisations at the forefront of Maharashtra's anti-superstition movement mounted pressure, the police was compelled to arrest him.

While Patil got bail in the September 20 incident, he was subsequently booked under a more stringent law — Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and the Black Magic Bill 2013, also known as the Anti-Superstition Bill, Black Magic Bill. Each clause of the Act carries a minimum sentence of six months and a maximum sentence of seven years, including a fine. The offences are non-bailable and cognizable.

The investigation officer of the case registered under this act has to be a police officer greater than the rank of a police inspector. It is under these sections that Patil remains in the lock-up.

Deputy Superintendent of police Ganesh Ingale, who is also the investigating officer for the case, said, "During interrogation, Patil claimed that he was innocent and not a swami or baba. He claimed he never wanted to be one, but his followers had insisted. He also said he had not performed any miracles or brought a dead person alive."

He is a bhondu baba'

Vinod Waygankar, district head of the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (Committee for Eradication of Blind faith founded by rationalist Narendra Dabholkar in 1989) of Ratnagiri, said, "It's all a result of illiteracy. When they fall ill or suffer a medical challenge, villagers turn to babas instead of doctors. In rural India, it will be tough to find good doctors, but every village will have a fraud or 'bhondu baba'. Swami Patil didn't perform miracles. He had admitted it. "No one saw his magic, but everyone believed the stories he spun. It's only after videos of the drama inside the math went viral, that he was exposed."

<http://www.mid-day.com/articles/maharashtras-ram-rahim-swami-krishna-patil-for-women-his-verbal-abuse-was-prasad/18637173>

Courtesy: Mid-day



Journey of Baba Ramdev from Godman to Business Tycoon

Rajesh Ghadge

When something controversial gets published about people who are either celebrities or politicians, it ends up getting banned or a defamation case is filed against the authors and publishers, and in this case, the book published by this lady journalist on Baba Ramdev had a similar fate. The followers of Baba and Baba himself did not take a liking towards this book and approached the court for an injunction on the sale of this book. Here in this article, we will tell you as to why this book has become a vehicle for so much controversy, and what dark secrets has the author revealed in her book titled “Godman to Tycoon” – The Untold Story of Baba Ramdev by journalist Priyanka Pathak-Narain.

According to Priyanka, while gathering the evidence for her book she realised that mysterious incidents constantly followed Baba and his journey from rags to riches was only possible due to these chain of incidents that have taken place during his journey. She claims that whichever Swami that Baba Ramdev has learned from had soon disappeared from his life.

To prove her point here she gave an example of Swami Shankar Dev who mentored Baba Ramdev and one day suddenly disappeared. His whereabouts are not known to anyone which makes it even more mysterious. According to the reports, Swami Shankar Dev went missing while he was on his morning walk. It was Swami Shankar who had donated the land belonging to Divya Mandir Trust worth crores of rupees to Baba Ramdev.

The most surprising thing here is, when Swami Shankar Dev had disappeared in July of 2007, Baba Ramdev was out of India for a period of one month and the writer Priyanka mentions that despite such a drastic incident, Ramdev did not come back to India and decided to stay abroad. As usual, the police could not manage to find out the mystery behind Swami Shankar's disappearance and the case was transferred to CBI who are still in the investigation but no information has surfaced to date.

Another incident the writer mentions in her Book is about the mysterious death of Swami Yoganand. Swami Yoganand was a close friend of Baba Ramdev and he himself was famous in the field of Ayurveda. According to the reports, Swami Yoganand gave the licence of Ayurveda to Ramdev in the year 1995 and thereafter until 2003 (almost 8 years) Baba Ramdev made use of Swami's license to manufacture the Ayurveda Medicines and in the year 2003, Baba terminated the contract with Swami Yoganand and after one year the body of Swami Yoganand was recovered from his house lying in the pool of blood. As usual, the police could not solve the murder case of Swami and the file was closed in the year 2005.

Another incident that Priyanka mentions in her book is the mysterious death of Rajiv Dikshit. Rajiv Dikshit was the guiding star for Baba's Swadeshi mission. The book of Priyanka Pathak reveals all the secrets connected with Baba's life. Priyanka writes in her book that, Rajiv Dikshit was the mentor of Baba Ramdev on his journey from Ayurveda till Swadesh Mission. The blueprint of the business that Baba runs today was designed by Rajiv Dikshit. There is a mystery surrounding the death of Dikshit who was present at an event on the day he died. According to the reports, Rajiv died due to a heart attack in the washroom after finishing the program. But the next day when the color of body started changing, his supporters demanded that post-mortem take place but that did not happen and his body was turned to ashes as per the Hindu rituals.

Another person that Priyanka mentioned in her book is Maharaj Karamveer. According to her, Karamveer was the director of Divya Mandir Trust and in the year 2005 due to some differences between him and Baba, separated from the trust. In a similar fashion, Baba also had a dispute with the co-founder of Astha Channel Mr. Mehta in the year 2009. It was the efforts of Mehta's Astha Channel that gave Baba name and fame he has today, she says.

In one of the interviews given to an international website, the author says that there are hundreds of such mysterious cases that have been piled under the multi-crore business empire that Baba runs today, and only Baba Ramdev and his partner Balkrishna know about it.

Whatever may be the secrets behind the success of Baba Ramdev, one thing is clear that today Baba is the brand image of Yoga and Ayurveda in India and his journey from Bicycle to Charter plane is not any less surprising than the success story of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The study of Baba by the author goes back to the year 2008 when she first had an opportunity to meet him. According to one report, Pathak-Narain first encountered Baba Ramdev when he along

with some others launched the Ganga Raksha Andolan in Kanpur in 2008. “That’s where I met him and got to know him better. The reason I got roped in was that my sources in the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) told me that I should meet him and I get to know him better. This way I realized that he was willing to shed his role as merely a yoga Swami and take on something bigger. It was a very palpable sentiment you could pick up on,” she says.

“Godman to Tycoon” – The Untold Story of Baba Ramdev

Priyanka Pathak-Narain

Publisher: Juggernaut

Sale is banned

<https://timemail.in/turn-baba-ramdev-lady-journalist-exposed-secret-baba/>

Courtesy: Hindustan Times

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Holy Men — Theirs and Ours

Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy

India and Pakistan have more influential holy men per square mile than anyone has ever counted. Some are just rich, others both powerful and rich. Once upon a time their followers were only the poor, superstitious and illiterate. But after the massive resurgence of religion in both countries this base has expanded to include politicians, film and cricket stars, and college-educated people who speak English and drive posh cars.

It is rare for an Indian holy man to bite the dust but one just did. The self-styled messenger of God, Ram Rahim Singh of Dera Sacha Sauda was convicted of two rapes by an Indian court. He is also accused of 52 other rapes, two murders, and storing 400 pairs of testicles in his refrigerators cut from 400 devotees on the promise of getting them nirvana. An avid Modi supporter, Singh travelled in entourages of 100-plus cars and claims 50-60 million followers. Vote-hungry politicians have touched his feet and done deals. After his conviction his crazed followers rioted, convinced of a conspiracy against their God. So far 38 people have died, hundreds injured, cars and public buildings set on fire.

But although Singh is one of India’s bigger holy men he is still small, dispensable fry. The really powerful ones are those who have learned the value of using religion in national politics. Today India is living out the extremist Hindutva ideology of Golwalkar and Savarkar with a head of government who is unabashedly committed to Hindu supremacy. This holy man’s clear and evident role in the communal riots of Gujarat in 2002 had led to his being banned from entering the US in 2005. However, no Indian court could find any wrongdoing committed by the then chief minister, now prime minister.

Pakistan's holy men also come in two sorts. The pir resembles the Hindu and Sikh spiritual guru in some respects. He hands out amulets, prescriptions, and blessings — usually for a hefty price — to credulous mureeds (followers). Pirs allegedly have magical healing powers. For example, Benazir Bhutto was a mureed of the prescient Pir Pinjar, a man who claimed to cure terminally ill patients by spraying water on them with a garden hose. Her husband, ex-president Asif Ali Zardari, had a black goat sacrificed daily on the advice of his pir. But educated Muslims increasingly spurn such practices and the pir is losing out.

The second kind of Pakistani holy man — the mullah — has had a very different trajectory. Once a poor and largely harmless cleric, he was the butt of many a joke. Sought only for funerals and Friday prayers, he eked out an existence by teaching the Quran to children. Allama Iqbal heaped scorn upon him: Teri namaz main baqi jalal hai na jamal (The prayers you lead are empty of grace and grandeur), Teri azaan main nahin meri sehr ka payam (Your azan is cold and uninspiring).

But the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 changed the mullah's fortunes. Indispensable to the US-Pakistan-Saudi grand jihad alliance, this once pathetic figure could now be seen driven around in a SUV, commanding a militia, or screaming through multiple turbo-charged loudspeakers. Some eventually became successful land-grabbers, wheeler-dealers, and shady entrepreneurs. Few Pakistanis will fail to recognise the identities of Maulana Diesel, Maulana Whiskey, and Mullah Disco.

Serious conflict between mullah and state came after 9/11. Gen Musharraf's apparent surrender to America enraged the mullah, who resolved to seize control of the Pakistani state. Ensnared in the heart of Pakistan's capital, armed vigilante groups from Islamabad's Red Mosque and Jamia Hafsa took over a government building, in January 2007. They kidnapped ordinary citizens and policemen, and repeated the demands of tribal militants fighting the Pakistan Army. From their FM station they broadcast a message: "We have weapons, grenades and we are expert in manufacturing bombs. We are not afraid of death." Islamabad turned into a war zone and, by the time the insurrection was finally crushed, 150-200 lives had been lost.

Pakistani courts have failed to convict our holy men (as well as women). For example, Maulana Aziz and Umme Hassan (his wife, who headed Jamia Hafsa) were exonerated of any wrongdoing and are today going about their normal business. The court had ruled that possession of heavy weaponry by the accused could not be proven. It dismissed TV footage that showed Aziz's students with gas masks firing Kalashnikovs. Weapons seized by the army and placed in a police armoury disappeared mysteriously. Although 10 of Pakistan's crack SSG commandos died in the crackdown, the army — known for quick action in Balochistan — also did not pursue the case.

Why have Indians and Pakistanis become so tolerant — nay, supportive — of holy men, whether of the spiritual or political kind? Why are those who aspire to power so successful in using religion to motivate their electorates? After all, this is the 21st century, not the 12th.

The culprit could be modernity. Technology has created enormous psychological distress by doing away with traditional ways of living and bringing in a new, uncertain and ever-changing world.

Older forms of associations such as the extended family and village community, together with their values, are disappearing. Cramped living conditions, pollution, ugliness all around, and job insecurities are a fact of life for most urban dwellers.

There is enormous nostalgia for the time when the world was supposedly perfect. This is why people looking for simple answers to today's complex questions eagerly buy the wares peddled by holy men. Just as Hindutva encourages Indian Hindus to dream of the 'authentic' India, Muslim clerics tell their followers to dream of reclaiming Islam's ancient glories.

But this is clutching at a straw. It gets far worse when religion is infused into politics. This produces a highly toxic, explosive mix as large masses of people blindly and unquestioningly follow holy men. Instead of dividing people still further, whether inside or outside national boundaries, South Asian states should aspire towards becoming a part of cosmopolitan world society removed from the prejudices of religion, caste and race.

Courtesy: Dawn

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Why Secularism in India Is Under Serious Threat

Ritu Menon

In March, we witnessed an event of momentous consequences – not only because it was so unexpected, but also because it was unprecedented. The head of a religious institution was appointed the chief minister of a state in the (secular) Union of India. At the time of writing, he continues to hold both offices: head priest of the Gorakhnath Math and head of the state of Uttar Pradesh.

It would be correct to say that nowhere in the world, with the exception of Iran, does this situation prevail, not even in Pakistan. Or Malaysia. Or Indonesia.

In May, the Supreme Court will hear a batch of petitions on the constitutional validity of the practice of triple *talaq*, polygamy and *nikah halala* among Indian Muslims. The petitions have been filed by both the government of India and women's organisations, notably the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan and the Bebaak Collective.

Why am I mentioning these two apparently unrelated developments? What does Adityanath have to do with Muslim personal law?

For one, both matters have to do with constitutionality, although only one has come up for consideration (the other, whether the head of a religious body can also be the chief minister of a state, has not yet been raised.) For another, both are indicative of the extent to which the domain

of religions now impinges on the political and vice versa. Also, both present a challenge to the secular character of the state, as well as of the nation.

However, my concern has to do with one other feature of this development – the steady consolidation of patriarchy that this nexus of religion, politics and the state portends – for the society and the whole country, obviously, but especially for women and all those who are marginalised.

Notwithstanding the Indian version of secularism, in which there is no clear separation of church and state, the Republic of India is statedly secular, as are its major institutions. We can argue about whether, in practice, they are unequivocally and unfailingly so, but the important fact is that they are bound by the constitution to uphold secular values. The appointment of Adityanath as chief minister of UP assumes significance in this regard.

The persistence and perpetuation of all personal laws, predicated on religious belief or religious-cultural customary practice, present a secular state with a peculiar conundrum: upholding the freedom to practice the religion of one's choice, and simultaneously upholding and guaranteeing individual freedoms, and freedom from discrimination on grounds of race, caste, creed, sex and so on.

However, all religions are fundamentally inegalitarian, inherently patriarchal and exclusive. No religion believes in equality as a fundamental right, and as an essential human condition. All religions actively endorse patriarchal control and privilege, and all practice exclusion in one form or another, albeit none as systematically and abhorrently as Hinduism.

When church and state come together, then, either by default or design, all three features – inequality, patriarchal control and exclusionary practices – are consolidated. What also gets consolidated are patriarchal attitudes and assertions within religion, society, the polity and, most critically, the state itself.

Adityanath embodies the marriage between religion and politics, and so far there have been no indications that the former will either be subordinate to the latter, or kept out altogether. In fact, all the causes that Adityanath espouses have been reinforced: 'love *jihad*', reconversion or *ghar wapsi* (an echo of the erstwhile Arya Samaj's *shuddhi* programme), closure of slaughter houses, tacit support to rampaging cow vigilantes, anti-Romeo squads. In the form of anti-Romeo squads, the arms of the state have been deployed to coerce, threaten and violently subdue. In other cases, the same arm of the state that is responsible for maintaining the rule of law refrains from enforcing it.

Meanwhile, readers will recall that as an MP, Adityanath, had voted against reservations for women in the parliament in 2010, saying "women power does not require freedom, but protection and channelisation," and that "if a woman becomes powerful ... she becomes a devil". He doesn't seem to have changed his mind.

The All India Muslim Personal Law Board believes it is its religious duty to uphold patriarchal privilege, as sanctioned by Shari'a, in matters relating to divorce and polygamy. At the same time, using circular reasoning, it puts forward the argument that while triple talaq may be repugnant to

Islam, it is legally allowed and so cannot be done away with. It recommends a social boycott of erring husbands instead. Adityanath, ever the champion of the oppressed, wants to hold mass meetings with Muslim women in UP to hear from them directly about whether or not triple talaq, polygamy and nikah halala are acceptable to them.

The issue of Muslim personal law especially, always contentious and always politicised, presents yet another conundrum for a secular state: how to disentangle the religious from the political and adjudicate on the matter in accordance with constitutional principles, rights and guarantees.

As individuals we may be Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi – or we may choose to be none of these. But as far as the Indian Union is concerned, we are Indians first and foremost, citizens of a secular state, and that should be our primary identity. Conceding or cementing patriarchal practices that underpin all religions not only flies in the face of individual fundamental rights, it also reinforces the multiple patriarchies that operate in families, in society, in politics. As a result, competitive patriarchy is what often surfaces, with tacit political sanction.

For all its limitations, the secular option is the only one that offers the possibility of realising substantive equality for all those, but especially women, who are marginalised and discriminated against. This is not to say that patriarchies will vanish overnight or be rendered ineffective; but that by maintaining a separation of religion and politics, some of the more strident among them will be neutralised.

We need a genuinely secular space in which informed discussions can take place on complex issues of identity and allegiance; a space in which an individual has the right to exit his or her religious community if they wish to and is assured the protection of the state; a space in which we are not required to exercise a false choice between self and community, or between religious conviction and personal freedom.

We need a genuinely secular space in which progressive social change is enabled, not impeded; in which conservative trends are discouraged; in which those on the margins are drawn in, not pushed over the edge.

It is this space that is under serious threat today.

<https://thewire.in/132152/india-secularism-religion/>

Courtesy: The Wire

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Science should have the last word

Jayant V. Narlikar

A few years ago, I was at an international conference in Delhi which dealt with important issues arising from changes brought about by the rapid progress of science and technology. As the meeting progressed, with international experts highlighting the action needed in various fields, I began to feel uncomfortable, much like a diner at a sumptuous buffet searching desperately for that missing ingredient — a pinch of salt. The subject I wanted to hear about but which was being glossed over by the speakers was “scientific temper”. Ultimately, it was left to me to make a case for it, not only for the scientists but also for the common citizen, whatever his or her occupation.

What is scientific temper? Let me cite a quote from Jawaharlal Nehru’s book, *The Discovery of India*: “The impact of science and the modern world have brought a greater appreciation of facts, a more critical faculty, a weighing of evidence, a refusal to accept tradition just because it is tradition...”

He then went on to say: “But even today, it is strange, how we suddenly become overwhelmed by tradition, and the critical faculties of even intelligent men cease to function...” Nehru concludes with the hope that, “Only when we are politically and economically free, will the mind function normally and critically.”

No difference

Alas, what has been the outcome? More than seven decades have elapsed since Nehru’s deadline of Indian independence but where are we *vis-à-vis* scientific temper? We continue to be hidebound with tradition and waste precious time and money in rituals which may have been relevant in earlier times but which have no relevance to modern living.

An interesting sidelight on superstitions has been thrown by Jiří Grygar, a scientist and science communicator from the Czech Republic. He finds that during the Soviet-dominated era, no superstitious ideas were publicly aired as these were feared to be against the beliefs subscribed to by the state. In the ‘free’ thinking times that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, all pent-up superstitions have come up.

Superstitions thrive

Further, there are new superstitions that have their origin in the age of space technology. Towards the end of the last century, I had visited the radio telescope at Arecibo in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico forms one of the vertices of a rather notorious triangle whose other vertices are at Bermuda and Florida. Known as the Bermuda Triangle, it has generated considerable excitement because of a claim that it formed a region within which mysterious (and possibly malicious) forces were present. A book on the Bermuda Triangle by

Charles Berlitz which describes disturbing and unfathomable events makes for fascinating reading. If those accounts were true then the Bermuda Triangle did encompass a sinister region. There have also been accounts of pilots losing their way and their lives, and watches stopping for an appreciable time, which, in short, were events that defied a rational scientific explanation.

A few years later, scientific attempts were made to test the veracity of the Triangle events. Lawrence David Kusche did seminal work in debugging the Triangle stories. His investigations have shown that the stories were either inflated, or did not tell the whole truth, or tinkered with the vital part of the evidence. Thus, one can safely say that there is no tangible evidence to ascribe an alien character to the Bermuda Triangle. Nevertheless as a scientist, whenever I invite questions from an audience of school or college students, the question inevitably pops up: What is the mystery behind all that is going on in the Bermuda Triangle? The questioner is visibly disappointed to learn that there are no black holes or dark energy or powerful aliens hiding there. When I asked my host in Arecibo how the locals react to such questions, he laughed and said that the Bermuda Triangle had long ceased to be a matter of concern. It of course serves the purpose of attracting tourists.

Harmful rays believed to be prevalent during a total solar eclipse keep many of our citizens behind closed doors. I once saw a total solar eclipse while in Zimbabwe. Recalling a previous eclipse in India, I was expecting to be greeted with the sight of empty roads and inhabitants behind closed doors in their houses, as is the case in India.

Nothing happened. Perhaps Zimbabweans were blissfully unaware of the evil rays. But in India, we are good at coming up with antidotes. As a housewife from a well-educated family once explained to me, the food in the fridge is supposed to be destroyed after an eclipse as evil rays will have contaminated it. However, the local priest had a solution which would avoid the food being wasted. His solution, the woman proudly told me, was to smear the fridge with cow dung, which would protect the food.

Here is another example. An executive of a firm had to catch a flight on a certain day but found out later that travelling on that particular day was inauspicious. He was told that the day prior to this was a “good” day. But he had other engagements that day. So what did he do? He stored his bag in his neighbour’s house on the earlier day and picked it up while on his way to the airport the following day. By leaving the bag in the neighbour’s house he was supposed to have begun his journey the previous “auspicious” day. This trick, known as “keeping prasthan”, is sufficient to deceive evil spirits.

From mythology

All these are examples of pseudoscience that grow around superstitions. But there are apparently more serious aspects that have grown around our mythology. Did our Vedic forefathers possess a knowledge of

science that was well beyond the level attained by modern science? While references in our Puranas to the Pushpak Viman, Vishwamitra's counter heaven in mid air, and weapons such as the Brahmastra and Indra's Shakti look persuasive, they do not have the details that would stand the test of scientific scrutiny. If such claims are to have standing, their supporters have to give us their technical details. For example, what was the basic mathematical principle that explains how a craft such as the Pushpak is lifted and which propelled it through air? And, if the Brahmastra was a nuclear device, which would indicate a knowledge of nuclear physics, why are there no references to the forces of electricity and magnetism, knowledge of which would be necessary to understanding nuclear physics? In today's modern age, the facility of running tap water and electric lighting is considered the basic minimum for living and forms a part of the manifestos of all political parties. Yet, as the Mahabharata tells us, the Hastinapur palace of Duryodhana or the Indraprastha abode of the Pandavas did not possess this minimal facility.

Recently, there was a claim made in India that the Darwinian theory of evolution is incorrect and should not be taught in schools. In the field of science, the sole criterion for the survival of a theory is that it must explain all observed phenomena in its domain. For the present, Darwin's theory is the best such theory but it is not perfect and leaves many questions unanswered. This is because the origin of life on earth is still unexplained by science. However, till there is a breakthrough on this, or some alternative idea gets scientific support, the Darwinian theory is the only one that should continue to be taught in schools.

In the final analysis, scientific evidence is what should have the last say.

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/science-should-have-the-last-word/article22777732.ece>

Courtesy: The Hindu



With Ministers like These, Every Day Must Be Science Day

Vasudevan Mukunth

February 28 is not India's first 'Science Day' in 2018. In fact, it's the fourth.

The first 'Science Day' was on January 20, when Satyapal Singh, minister of state for Human Resource Development (HRD), said Charles Darwin was wrong and scientists from around the country rose up in measured frustration against his statement, had three science academies issue a statement and, most of

all, elicit an admonition from HRD minister Prakash Javadekar against Singh. The second ‘Science Day’ was budget day, February 1, when Arun Jaitley’s dismal offerings for fundamental research sparked a conversation of both hope and despair among scientists in labs around the country. The third ‘Science Day’ was when the MHRD announced the Prime Minister’s Research Fellowship without, it would seem, any consultation with stakeholders, the result being some scientists dubbing it an unmitigated disaster poised to demoralise the bulk of India’s best young research minds. On the fourth ‘Science Day’, two of the country’s science academies, the Indian National Science Academy and the Indian Academy of Sciences, have together organised an event in Delhi today with its chief guest being none other than Satyapal Singh. It seems the original plan had been to conduct the event at the Rashtrapati Bhawan convention centre with the country’s president in attendance along with a few ministers, giving a talk to scientists, 300 schoolchildren, etc. As one scientist told me, “Science Day has to be celebrated with scientists, not politicians”, so the absence of the majority of those invited shouldn’t play foul to what can still be a useful occasion for school-goers to connect with veterans of research. One of the organisers mentioned that today is also International Rare Disease Day, and the gathering will be used to discuss rare diseases as well.

Actually, February 28 is the 59th ‘Science Day’ this year, since it’s the 59th day since the start of the year. This is because every day is ‘Science Day’. In fact, it was ‘Science Day’ on February 26 when a scientist announced the improvised version of a card game, developed since 2015, on Twitter to help its players understand “information exchange during mate choice”. It’s ‘Science Day’ every Monday because there’s a new Life of Science article out. It’s ‘Science Day’ every morning when science writers and journalists think about what they are going to write about that day.

February 28 has traditionally been used to commemorate the discovery of the Raman effect by C.V. Raman, India’s sole Nobel laureate in the sciences; this way, the day has quietly become the foundation for a state-sponsored valorization of a single prize awarded by a bunch of Swedish academics. India has seen many scientists of the calibre of Raman but many of them are not as well-remembered because they didn’t win international – particularly Western – recognition (consider the story of Meghnad Saha).

This is the same West that many of our ministers are also fond of deriding. The truth is that it’s complicated. We know the West will favour the West, infrequently because of irrational prejudices and frequently because of systematic defects that repeatedly and increasingly penalise India – and most of Asia, Africa and Latin America – for the way it treats national scientific enterprise. Others are to blame, sure, but we’re to blame the most. Part of the problem is our top-down approach to administering scientific research and education, a symptom of which is ‘celebrating’ science on a single day and relegating to it a nook behind the mind’s backburners on all other days.

The myth of the ‘lone genius’

Additionally, it must be noted that the Raman effect was not discovered on a single day, nor was it discovered by the endeavours of one person alone. Sure, Raman may have been looking through the data, piecing the numbers together and elucidating the presence of an effect he was the first in the scientific literature to make sense of (though even this is disputed). For India at the moment, it's more important to examine the things that fell in place for his discovery to become possible. This isn't a prompt to draw up a roster of the people who helped (such as Lokasundari Ammal and K.S. Krishnan) but rather an occasion to reflect on such intangibles as theoretical foundations, inspiration, social support, the academic environment in which Raman conducted his experiment, the political environment that ensured he had the money, the opportunities he had to correspond with international scientists and journals, etc. In short, the discovery of the Raman Effect is a product of multiple factors, not a single moment in the history of science.

But no – it would seem ‘Science Day’ is a day to think about the science. This is unfair; we have scientists who know how to conduct their research. Let's use the day – and all days – to make such research more possible, meaningful, enjoyable and equitable, please?

The government has had opportunities to remedy the situation every year but it fails to bite. This is a nonpartisan judgment: the UPA I and II regimes that preceded the prevailing reign of the BJP might seem more benign in contrast but that means nothing to a postdoc scholar whose stipend hasn't been paid in months, nothing to a community the total public expenditure on whom is the highest today at a shocking 0.69% of GDP, and nothing to an enterprise whose usefulness is being gauged solely in terms of what it has to offer to the shape-shifting, self-serving agenda of “national interest”.

Away from the funding front, we also have opportunities every year in the form of instituting better fellowships, smoothening the process of applying for and receiving research grants on time, fostering more consultations between industry, government and academia, etc. On a broader level, the private sector has cut ahead in areas where the corporatisation of science has become desirable because the bureaucratisation of science has become detestable. A common example is drug research and discovery.

Here's an uncommon one: awards. The Infosys Prizes are better organised than are the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prizes. There's an email blast that goes out to journalists when the winners of the former are announced; the press is invited to sit in during the award ceremony; then a PR team kicks in, pushing interviews with the prize's winners among journalists from prominent media outlets. On the other hand, the Bhatnagar prize has been awarded for 60 years to over 500 scientists – but nothing of the sort Infosys undertakes has ever happened. In fact, on the sole occasion there has been fanfare surrounding a prize, it was awarded to Appa Rao Podile – the VC of the University of Hyderabad, a plagiarist as well as a man

accused of specifically disprivileging lower caste students on campus – by the organisers of the 2017 Science Congress.

Hell, we have everyday opportunities in the form of getting ministers to celebrate legitimate scientific achievements instead of abdicating one's responsibility towards lakhs of scientists and crawling back into the now-barren womb of "ancient India", puranas and whatnot.

Science day every day

It's evident by now that it's not the availability of opportunities but the will to seize them. Further yet, it's not that the will doesn't exist but that the intent doesn't. We're not faced with a group of ministers bungling their jobs but a group that knows exactly what it's doing: angle for what they say is the 'national interest', and force everything else to tag along. By cornering our reasons to celebrate science into the confines of a single workday, we're at risk of abetting what our ministers are doing: abdicating responsibilities towards science on other days.

This includes attending schools, colleges and universities; interacting with schoolchildren and college students; sitting down with apex investigators to hear their concerns out; instituting independent science evaluation and funding bodies; giving talks about the importance of scientific research. In all, engaging with the country's multifarious research establishment towards reducing the separation between administrator and practitioner and engendering will be a more consultative approach to decision-making in the national interest.

Science is an everyday endeavour; celebrate it, scrutinise it, share it, demand it on every day of the year. Just the same way marking 'Earth Hour' is doing nothing to help Earth if you're not going to have environmentally conscious daily routines, you might as well not mark 'Science Day' if you're going to mark it on just one day.

<https://thewire.in/228392/february-28-is-science-day-so-no-other-day-is-is-it/>

Courtesy: The Wire



What It Means to ‘Reject’ Evolution, in the Words of a 1982 Judgment

S.K. Arun Murthi

The recent comment by Satyapal Singh, the Union minister of state for human resource development, that ‘evolution is unscientific’, takes a different tack on science than that of the saffron science brigade. The difference is that the votaries of saffron science have been going to the extent of attributing modern discoveries and insights to ancient sages, texts like the Vedas, Puranas and the products of other theological endeavours; even evolution had been compared to the Dashavatara. By appropriating such modern theories, their intention has been to grant pride of place to ancient enterprises. Singh’s comment, instead, takes a more regressive (and ridiculous) stance.

The theory of evolution is a part of the standard literature in the biological sciences. Of course, no theory in any of the sciences are held as dogma (at least, they’re not supposed to be). At the same time, a theory can be rejected or falsified using explanations and arguments based on evidence and not by issuing public statements, as the minister seems to have done.

The dismissal of a theory for scientific wrongness should be preceded, or accompanied, by an understanding of what science is. Does the minister know this?

Something similar happened in the US. In the 1980s, some politicians and people were pushing to have creation science included in school curricula. The votaries of creationism wanted the teachers at schools to hold evolution and creationism on equal footing. Arkansas passed a law to this effect. Its lawmakers did not say blatantly that evolution wasn’t scientific the way Singh has but wanted to pass off creationism as being equally scientific.

Scientists subsequently challenged the law’s constitutionality, and the judge hearing it refused to admit creationism as a science. The court’s ruling could prove instructive to Singh as well as the saffron science brigade as such.

Bearing upon the testimony of scientists and philosophers, the judge drafted some criteria that overlaid a certain conception of science. Scientific knowledge, according to the judgement (McLean v. Arkansas, 1982), ought to possess the following characteristics:

- Be guided by natural law
- Be explanatory by reference to natural law
- Be testable against the empirical world.

Have conclusions that are tentative (i.e. not necessarily the final word), and

- Be falsifiable

The scientists who had challenged Arkansas's law had protested that creationism was a bit of religious speculation masquerading science. There was nothing to be found in its canon that could have satisfied the judge's criteria. In fact, he (William Overton) had also noted that the creationists had taken the Bible's contents literally and attempted to find scientific support for it, and quoted from *Studies in The Bible and Science*, a book by a creationist named Henry Morris, to make his point.

... it is ... quite impossible to determine anything about Creation through a study of present processes, because present processes are not creative in character. If man wishes to know anything about Creation (the time of Creation, the duration of Creation, the order of Creation, the methods of Creation, or anything else) his sole source of true information is that of divine revelation. God was there when it happened. We were not there ... Therefore, we are completely limited to what God has seen fit to tell us, and this information is in His written Word. This is our textbook on the science of Creation!

Singh's words were similar to Morris's: "Nobody, including our ancestors, in written or oral, have said they saw an ape turning into a man. ... Our nana–nani [grandparents] never mentioned Darwin going to the jungle to witness ape-to-human transformation. His theory is wrong, it should not be taught. Humans appeared on Earth as humans from the very beginning."

His language implies that he subscribes to the view that scientific theories have to be handed down as revelation and that they are not to be worked out rationally, on the basis of natural laws and empirical testing. Further, evolution does not claim that apes became people in a single transformation, only that they have common ancestors. This – and other parts of the theory – have been supported by fossil records. In sum, it seems the minister is not only unaware of the specifics of what he's talking but also of the basic characteristics of science.

<https://thewire.in/216863/means-reject-evolution-words-1982-judgment/>

Courtesy: The Wire



The Karnataka Anti-Superstition Act and its Impact

Narendra Nayak

Karnataka is the second state to think of passing a law to curb some of the most dangerous and anti-human practices related to irrational beliefs. Having worked in the field to eradicate superstitions over the past four decades in Karnataka, it is time for me to put down a few opinions on this proposed law. The Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, of which I am the president, has been demanding a law to separate religion from politics, a common civil code, and laws to protect the people from the machinations of those who claim to possess, or control, supernatural powers.

The demand for such an Act at the state level was first put forward by the Maharashtra Andha Sharddha Nirmulan Samithi (MANS), and Dr Narendra Dabholkar worked for a long time to get it passed in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly. But it got blocked in the legislative council by those with vested interests. For several years, MANS worked hard to make amendments that would make it acceptable to all. But despite these compromises, the Act was still not passed. Whenever I met Dabholkar, I would ask him about it and the reply would be that more compromises were required. We have every reason to believe that it was this attempt to push the Act that resulted in Dabholkar's assassination. After he was sacrificed, the Bill was passed. This was very much a watered down and weak version of what Dabholkar intended; but it was accepted because something would be better than no such law at all.

Following the protests against Dabholkar's murder, we had proposed that such legislation should be enacted for Karnataka too, as our problems were similar. The legislation would be a step to eradicate superstitions from a deeply religious society like ours, where exploitation of the gullible is age-old. The work involved went on; we found that even the then Chief Minister of Karnataka, Yeddyurappa, was not free from superstition.

Our efforts were supported by a good number of progressive thinkers, organisations and even some of the progressive mutts. Though it seemed strange that religious institutions would support such legislation, some of them did, and they even took the initiative to bring together the various supporters. This was followed by two draft bills: one by the National School of Law at Bengaluru and another by the State Law University at Dharwad. These were consolidated and put forward for public discussion. An attempt was made to address a number of superstitions such as astrology, vaastu and palmistry. At the same time, a few issues such as made snana (rolling over the leaves on which brahmins have eaten), pankti bheda (caste-based places for serving meals) were brought in. This was followed by great opposition from the Hindutva groups. They claimed this was an anti-Hindu law; they tried to scare people by saying that a tilak

or a bindi would be considered punishable under the law, and so would a tulsi plant! The Lok Sabha elections were due at the time; the government developed cold feet; and the bill was put in cold storage.

Later on, when M M Kalburgi was assassinated, the agitation for the legislation began again, this time with the demand that the Act be named after him. A number of meetings were held, including one at Freedom Park at Bengaluru which was attended by two ministers of the Karnataka government. I remember questioning them about when the draft bill would be made into a law. It had happened in Maharashtra after Dabholkar was murdered. In Karnataka Kalburgi had been killed. I asked them: How many more of us do you want to sacrifice before this legislation is enacted?" I feel sorry now that my words were prophetic: the cabinet has now approved the Bill after the ghastly murder of Gauri Lankesh, one of the first to ask for the passing of the Bill. It is ironic that she is not here to see the success of her efforts.

In a land where religion takes precedence over so much else, this Bill seems to bring a glimmer of hope. The Bill plans to tackle Bhanamathi — allegedly a type of black magic practised in Hyderabad. But though I have been campaigning against it for more than two decades, I am yet to see anyone who practises it. We see only the victims. The fear of this "magic" is such that people do not even mouth the word. One good feature of the Bill is that it seeks to address indignities against women such as ostracisation, segregation during menstruation and pregnancy, or parading them naked in the name of worship. There is, however, the possibility that if such practices are claimed as part of religious tradition, they may be exempted. Astrology and vastu, not scientific by any stretch of the most fertile imagination, are exempt. The government itself encourages non-science in the name of traditional beliefs without the need for evidence. For example, homeopathy, which is being encouraged, would really qualify as a superstition since there is no evidence of its efficacy. Suicide by starvation (the Jain practice of *sallekhana* or *santara*) is exempt. Again, the propagation of so called miracles of dead people would not be an offence. For example, it would not be an offence to claim that the dead Puttaparthi godman is producing things from thin air; or that Jesus Christ converted water into wine. Again, circumcision and female genital mutilation would not be offences as they are "accepted" religious practices.

Given all these inadequacies and loopholes, much work remains. That a vigilance officer will monitor the provisions of the law, and the government will seek to identify violations appears to be a welcome move. But how it works remains to be seen. The punishment also appears modest — imprisonment for not less than a year and a fine of Rs. 5000.

At the same time, one central point remains for discussion. Can superstitions be eradicated by legislation? My own answer is a vehement No, because no legislation can substitute for education.

What would be a better solution to the problems of superstitions in a country like ours? The answer would be education – but in the true sense of the word, and not the literacy passed off as education today. Teaching the younger generation to think rationally, and question received wisdom before accepting it would be the best solution. We have engineers, doctors, lawyers and scientists who are literate, or rather knowledgeable in their own subjects, but who do not think rationally about what they encounter in the other aspects of their lives. We have astronomers fasting during eclipses, doctors who believe that the application of holy ash will cure disease or that the blessings of a holy man are necessary for a successful surgery.

Article 51 of the Constitution of India defines the duties of the citizen. One such duty is to develop scientific temper, the spirit of enquiry and humanism. The implementation of this duty should be our real aim. We must work for this constitutional duty of every citizen prevailing over minor legislations such as the Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Bill, 2017.

<https://sabrangindia.in/article/karnataka-anti-superstition-act-its-impact>

Courtesy: **Sabrang India**



Charwak Darshan; The most vilified philosophy

Sharad Bedekar

Charwaks were accused of being thoughtless and self-indulgent and to support this allegation an oft repeated but distorted saying of the Charwaks was -'eat ghee even if you have to incur debt' as quoted in the 'Sarvadarshan Sangraha' - a book in which all philosophies are brought together. But the original Charwak saying was - 'Live happily as long as you are alive; incur debt if necessary, but eat Ghee (to maintain health); for (this is the only life) once (your) body is burnt, where is it going to come back again?'

Some scholars maintain that the distorted stanza is extrapolated in the name of Charwaks; but Dr Salunkhye, in his book, named 'Astik Shiromani Charwak' -meaning 'Charwak- the most superior theist' takes a contrary position which is worth being taken notice of. He says, even taking for granted that this stanza belongs to the Charwaks, a mere cursory glance reveals the following details.

- Even if Charwaks told us to incur debt if necessary, they did not tell us not to repay it. (for they certainly knew that repaying it is necessary to live a happy life.)

- They did not ask us to borrow money at any exorbitant rate of interest. Here it is worth mentioning that the 'Manusmriti' stipulates discriminating and unjust rates of interest as 2, 3, 4, and 5 percent from Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras respectively.
- Charwaks wanted us to drink ghee not Somaras, Madira or liquor.
- They told us to drink ghee so that we may not waste it burning in the Yagnyas.
- They told us to borrow money to buy ghee and not to pilfer and steal it defraying others. (As opposed to this our religious scriptures are replete with mandates, rules, etc. coaxing Brahmins to defray others, if necessary, to obtain their 'Dakshina' or funds for performing Yagnyas.)

Instead of accepting the apparent literal meaning of the Shlokas written in the 'Sootra' style, we should read between the lines for their real meaning. The above Charwak Shlok will then reveal , ' Borrow money if necessary, but make sure that you use it for farming, husbandry, rearing animals or trade and industry, and ensure that you earn enough to be able to drink ghee and remain healthy. Isn't this the most wise and useful advice for everybody? Nothing can be better than this for a common man!

Prof. Sadashiv Athavale in his book 'Charwak - History and philosophy' (Pradnya Pathashala Mandal, Vai) tried to figure out what the highly developed 'Charwak Darshan' of the 14-15 century could have said. In his opinion it would be as follows:

1. Atma, Supreme God, Cycle of Death and rebirth, Karmaphalasiddhant, etc.: The living body of the human being itself is Atma. There is no separate entity 'Atma' that can exist before birth or after the death of a human being. The world and the living beings are born out of natural impulse. There is no need for worshipping a supreme god since no such entity exists. It is not possible for a human body to be born again once it is burnt to ashes. The Karmaphalasiddhant that tells us that the Atma is reborn in order to reap the fruit of his deeds of the earlier births is a false doctrine. Discard the doctrine of Fatalism that tells you that your woes and joys are caused by your deeds of the earlier births and believe in your own efforts to enhance your self esteem. Women are equal to men and in no way inferior to them. Conjugal fidelity or chastity is in reality not a value. It is a weapon of the malicious men for attacking women's freedom.
2. The Universe made up of elements, Yagnya, The other world, Religion, Emancipation, etc.: This universe, the human body and the vitality between them are born out of natural combining of the elements. The Yagnya has several defects like violence, amorous dalliance, etc. moreover it is a sheer waste of food. So do not perform Yagnyas. There is no heaven, hell or the other world. The shrewd priests ask you to perform rituals for getting sweet fruit, ask you to do so for their own material and economic benefits. Thus the Charwaks denied the religion they advocated, Yagnya and other rituals.

They refuted Moksha. For them death is Moksha - emancipation. Freedom for them is of greatest value in life.

3. Validity, king's rule, Chaturvarnya, etc.: Seeing is believing. Somebody's word and book including even the Veds are not necessarily valid. Inference is not evidence. However for practical purposes, logical inferences based on direct observation can be considered valid. Charwaks accepted king's authority for its undoubted utility. They also supported the human values -justice and morality whole heartedly. They maintained that all human beings of all colours are equal and denied Chaturvarnya, caste discrimination and purity of race and all such ideas of superiority and inferiority that are unscientific.
4. Hedonism: Charwaks advocated hedonism. They said that man should work hard either in agriculture, trade or service and earn and be happy. He need not seek pleasure in promiscuity and should restrain himself from excesses. So they told that one should adhere to Charwak philosophy for the benefit of the masses. However their hedonism was deliberately distorted and they were accused as reckless pleasure seekers.

Charwak Darshan, the most logical and rational philosophy, unparalleled in all Indian Philosophies was also the most ridiculed by other philosophies including the Jain and Bauddha that refuted god, because they could not counter Charwaks' arguments convincingly enough. The Jains and the Bauddhas both had denied the Veds, Yadnya, Supreme god and Brahma; and yet they did accept Atma and rebirth in some form or other. Instead of Moksha they believed in Kaivalya and Nirvan; created their own rituals, ways of worshipping and prayers; but not the steadfast Charwaks. They did not compromise their principles in any way. However the Charwak philosophy of 'seeing is believing' could not strike a sympathetic chord in the minds of common people, probably because they were very few or because they could not offer proper programmes advocating their philosophy. The priestly class with their interest vested in keeping people preoccupied with worshipping the almighty god and his unparalleled exploits hated Charwaks and their philosophy and must have successfully wiped them out from the Indian philosophical arena.

Once the field was cleared of the logical and scientific Charwak thought, we reversed our course and for the next thousand years, instead of searching for the natural laws in scientific ways, we were preoccupied with Bahjan-Keertan, mysteries of Puran, prayers and rituals and hoarding Punya (merit) thereby. Generations spent their lives in building the stock of Punnya, disregarding even the defence of our country for we expected the god to protect our temples and our country from the Muslim invasions. From the 13th to the 18th century- almost for five century-the Muslim aggressors from abroad could rule over us with ease.

After the end of the Maratha rule established by Shivaji Maharaj, the British ousted the Muslims and ruled over us for nearly hundred and fifty years. It was a boon, in a way; for the British were quite progressive and helped us join the main stream of progress eventually, in the revolutionary changes made by computer and telecommunication technology. Today we feel proud that ISRO could send a satellite to Mars. Otherwise while the world is progressing by leaps and bounds in scientific research and technology and various other fields, enriching human life, we would have been throwing rice and burning ghee in the Yadnyas and indulging in appeasing our 33 crore gods and goddesses. Today India is self dependent and is capable of choosing her own direction and course of action.

Translated by Ms Suman Oak

‘Hindutva calling itself a version of Hinduism is problematic’

Romila Thapar

At the vanguard of present day studies of Indian history, Professor Romila Thapar has always recognised history as a dynamic discipline, a continuous dialogue between the past and present. The author of several insightful books, she is now the subject of a new book, Talking History, published by Oxford University Press. In the book Ramin Jahanbegloo and Neeladri Bhattacharya not only explore her personal journey from Punjab to London, but also interview her on a host of issues such as historical methodology, epic literature and Hindu nationalism. Her select writings have also been compiled into four volumes under the title The Historian and Her Craft: Collected Essays and Lectures. True to form as a leading public intellectual, Thapar spoke extensively to Scroll.in about her new book, history, Hindutva and more. Excerpts from the interview:

In your book you speak about the need for public intellectuals in Indian society, who are needed more than ever in times like these. However, one does not get to see many academics, especially in the field of history, participating in public debates. Why do you think there's so much reluctance?

There are two reasons for this. One is that researchers are not trained to think about the relevance of their research to the rest of society. This is not so prevalent among historians, although many historians also do not make that connection. It is more noticeable for example, among scientists who carry out their experiments, motivated largely by the concerns of their research, and seldom ask about what its effect will be on society.

Whether we are scientists or non-scientists, we are not taught or encouraged to ask such a fundamental question. This is in part because education is still largely in the colonial mould, where such critical inquiry was not encouraged. And these days it is being reinforced by the official ideology that discourages asking questions. We still have not graduated to that level where college courses should begin with fundamental queries.

Those who are aware of the importance of questioning remain quiet because academic institutions and the general public alike do not appreciate questioning existing knowledge. In today's day and age, there's the additional fear that if you openly oppose that which is conventional, you will have to face dire consequences, as has happened in universities. This is why many of us were so pleased when a group of scientists recently objected strongly to a Minister from the HRD Ministry trashing Darwin's theory of evolution

Epic literature, you conclude, is not to be taken as factual evidence. However, despite being a fictional character, Padmini of Jayasi's *Padmavat* is constantly presented as a historical character. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are considered part of history by many. How does a public intellectual combat such claims?

By asking many questions. As historians, we need to know whether it's historical if it's being quoted as history. We have to investigate its role in the making of a society – does it determine social values, and can it be claimed as a source of social identities? Do people take it as a given truth about the past and do they determine their lives by it, claiming it as a source of their social status and identity? Or do they take it as great literature and an attractive fantasy about the past, but something they don't have to lay down their lives to defend?

Furthermore, what is the motivation behind converting that fantasy into a believed reality? This has much to do with the relationship of the present with the past, where the past has a lot of relevance today, especially in the area of social identity. In a society of such mixed identities, how can one find a single identity and declare that to be special? One of the ways to do this is to pick up a high status text, even if it is fictional, and to link one's ancestry to it, insisting that it is historical. Such claims come more often from groups that are socially insecure. Today, ironically, some of these groups are dominant castes because the future is so uncertain. Their erstwhile dominance is under some shadow.

Historians can point out all these different aspects. Equally important is to comment on the text being used not as epic literature from the past but as a political tool in the present.

You pose serious concerns about using memory as a source of history. However, isn't history largely a collection of memories of historical events committed to writing? Several historical texts

that we consider valid sources of history today draw upon the chronicler's memories. How would you explain such a conundrum?

Let me begin by disagreeing with your formulation that memory is the major source of history. This was so in the days when history was largely a narrative about the past. But now that history draws on and analyses a large number of sources on the past and is an attempt to explain the past, memory plays a rather small role. Other forms of recording the past are much more central. There are public papers, official statements and archaeological evidence that are given more credence than memory.

History derives from a variety of sources and in this interaction the reliability and value of different sources are assessed. Memory, therefore, is treated as a construction and subjected to critical inquiry. We don't take it at face value. We analyse it, take it apart and compare it with other sources. I would like to underline that whatever the source, analysing it is absolutely crucial and central to the writing of history.

Hindutva as an ideology today is fast gaining ground. Even though its proponents hark back to the Puranas, Hindutva's idea of Hinduism is the polar opposite of the assimilation that characterises Puranic Hinduism. Do you think the current fashioning of an exclusive, almost Abrahamic Hinduism marks a paradigm shift in the history of the religion?

We have to remember that all religions have a history. Religion is not static and changes with historical change. Religion is of two kinds: one is a personal religion comprising you and your relationship with the deity you worship; and then there is the public manifestation of religion where religion, as a social enterprise, tries to control society. This takes form after the religion becomes powerful and gains many followers. It sets up organisations that participate in, and determine the direction of, social activities.

Now Hindutva, constructed in the beginning of the 20th century, has had less impact on personal religion, and it does not attempt to redefine Hinduism as a religion per se. But it redefines the social controls exercised by the religion. So there is congregational worship, councils that lay down laws of social practices linked to Hindutva, belief in the historicity of the religion and its main figures as in the Abrahamic religions, etc.; in short the entire paraphernalia of an organisation comes into being which was not there earlier. Earlier, each sect had such concerns. But Hindutva is trying to make Hinduism uniform, by incorporating all the sects so that it becomes a monolithic religion.

An interesting difference between Hinduism and other religions is that Hinduism expressed itself historically through the creation, existence and growth of different sects. This enriches the religion and makes it open and plural. In the old days the openness of Hinduism was celebrated and the narrowness was limited to caste observances. Hindutva is trying to bring the narrowness into the religious observances too. The emphasis is on social organisation and political mobilisation through drills and Sunday Schools

and such like. That is why I have referred to Hindutva as “Syndicated Hinduism”. Hindutva calling itself a version of Hinduism is problematic as it is a departure from traditional Hinduism.

<https://scroll.in/article/866130/in-kashmir-food-corporation-of-india-is-under-a-cloud-after-grain-worth-rs-14-crore-goes-missing>

Courtesy: Scroll.in

‘God Did Not Create the Universe and Does Not Exist’

Stephen Hawking

Why does the universe exist? Where does that leave us?

We live in a world today where technology is developing at rapid speeds, yet we still have many unanswered questions. Who created the Universe? No one has an answer to that question yet, but Stephen Hawking has an interesting take on it.

The universe can and will create itself from nothing.

As you may know, Stephen Hawking often compared to Albert Einstein is well known as one of the brightest men on Earth. At age 21, Hawking was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease.

Stephen has not only overcome and beat some of the hardest odds, living 53 years longer than doctors expected. He’s never been one to let negativity in life get him down. Stephen is very knowledgeable and has spent years researching the universe’s origin.

Hawking feels that we didn’t have a “God” or a “divine creator”. He looks at the hard evidence of science and believes that it was an inevitable collision of physics and the right moment. Think back to the last science class you have ever taken, we all learned how gravity works, rights?

The law of gravity shows exactly how the universe can and will create itself from nothing. We exist because the universe exists, we have the Universe’s spontaneous creation to thank for that. Stephen Hawking says.

“If we do discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God.”

Hawking goes on to say new theories will continue to rise every day when it comes to astrophysicists, and our minds should be open to the possibilities how and why our universe arose. Furthermore, where does that leave us? You tell me.

Treated 'worse than animals':

Thousands of Indian women feared trapped in ashrams

Michael Safi

Neither the din of traffic nor the roar of aircraft from a nearby airport could blot out the screams neighbours say they regularly heard from the apartment building in west Delhi.

On Saturday, on the second floor of the unassuming complex in Mohan Garden, authorities discovered 21 women and children living in a heavily fortified “spiritual university”, at least five believed to be minors. Raids across India in the past week on properties linked to the same religious organisation, Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya (AVV), have unearthed nearly 250 women and 48 girls apparently confined behind layers of locked gates. Authorities in Delhi say they fear thousands more women could be living in similar conditions in the 300 properties estimated to be linked to the group nationwide. Syringes and medicines were found scattered throughout the Delhi ashrams and many of the residents appeared to be drugged, according to Swati Maliwal, the city commissioner for women, who participated in five of the raids.

Most of the women have refused opportunities to leave the ashrams. Those who appear to be under 18 have been taken to shelters but are providing little concrete information, Maliwal said. “We ask where they’re from, they can’t say. We ask them the address of their parents, they don’t have that. We ask how long they’ve been there, they give evasive answers,” she said. Gurus are enlightening guides in the lives of many Indians, providing counseling on issues ranging from moral quandaries to the choice of a new car.

But months after a flamboyant guru, Ram Rahim Singh, was convicted of raping two followers – sparking riots that killed 30 people – the raids of the past week have cast light on the immense, often unchecked power wielded by some spiritual leaders. At the centre of the organisation is a self-styled “godman”, Virendra Dev Dixit, with a chequered history including allegations of sexual assault dating to 1998. He is currently being sought by police and could not be reached for comment.

Accusations contained in documents filed with the Delhi high court allege that Dixit, 75, is portrayed by ashram workers as an incarnation of the Hindu god Krishna, with the women and girls cast as his *gopis*, or wives. The group claims to be a fundamentalist offshoot of Brahma Kumaris, an Indian spiritual movement with about 800,000 members and branches around the world including in the US, Australia and the UK. Brahma Kumaris disavowed Dixit decades ago and reject his beliefs. Families have complained of losing daughters to Dixit’s organisation for decades but have been unable to secure official attention until this year, when the Delhi high court took up a public-interest lawsuit against the group.

The case was spurred by the November disappearance of a 24-year-old woman from a town near Jaipur in Rajasthan state. Family members said she had initially become involved in yoga and meditation events put on by the Brahma Kumaris. But quietly, over the past five years, she was growing closer to members of Dixit's group. One day last month, in what investigators believe is standard practice for new converts, the woman entered a local police station with a signed affidavit declaring she was joining the AVV of her own free will. Soon after, she vanished.

A frantic search effort by the family traced the woman to a large Dixit ashram in Rohini, a neighbourhood in the north-west of the capital. In submissions to the Delhi high court, the family say they were only permitted to meet their daughter after protesting for days, and had to pass through seven layers of locked gates to meet her. They claim she was flanked by women guardians, and appeared to be anaesthetised. "The girl told them, I am 24, I have come here of my own wish, and I should not be forced to go back," said Satendra Singh Rathore, a lawyer for the family.

After their story was broadcast by Indian media, disaffected former members of the group and other families searching for their daughters reached out with their own allegations against Dixit. According to the public-interest lawsuit, they include accusations that Dixit has sexually assaulted multiple women and children and keeps residents confined in conditions "worse than farm animals". A spokeswoman for the AVV declined to comment but the organisation has previously said its residents stay of their own volition and are well-treated.

In a society driven by caste hierarchy and yawning economic inequality, ashrams and large-scale spiritual communities, called *deras*, were an appealing site of social equality and fraternity, said Ronki Ram, a professor of political science at Panjab University. Their popularity has grown as India's economy has opened to the world and incomes have soared in past decades. "Once people have everything, a partner, a good job, a family, and find they are not really happy, they go to a *dera*," Ram said. Spiritual organisations have also stepped to provide welfare in places where the state had retreated, he said. "Some have their own schools, hospitals. When the state starts withdrawing from providing basic facilities, the *deras* fill in the gaps."

He said politicians have been more likely to seek out gurus for votes than to try to regulate their communities: "They see [the gurus] have a large numbers of followers who can be constituencies." Dixit has never registered his organisation with the government. Years of criminal complaints against the guru did not heed a single inspection of his properties. Maliwal said it was typical of the lawless environment in which many spiritual leaders operated. "Nobody bothers to go inside their ashrams," she said.

“These babas are very influential people, they have a lot of clout. Sometimes they have mafias, and sometimes they are mafias. Nobody wants to deal with this issue.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/29/india-ashrams-thousands-women-feared-trapped-adhyatmik-vishwa-vidyalaya>

Courtesy: The Guardian



The Madness of Honor Killing

What makes people murder their own children for the sake of reputation?

In the UK, one of the main news items at the moment is the trial of the parents of a teenage girl called Shafiea Ahmed. They have been charged with murdering their daughter after she refused to go through with an arranged marriage. As British Asians, they expected her to marry a partner of their choice, as well as to dress modestly and avoid contact with men outside her family. But Shafiea wanted to live a more westernised lifestyle, to wear fashionable clothes and become a lawyer. After a trip to Pakistan to meet her prospective husband, she attempted suicide by drinking bleach. A few weeks later, after an argument with her mother about wearing a sleeveless t-shirt, she disappeared. Her decomposed body was found in a river months afterwards. The prosecution's main witness is Shafiea's sister, who claims to have seen her parents suffocate her, and dispose of the body.

Whether Shafiea's parents are found guilty or not, this is a tragic reminder of how common the practice of 'honor killing' is. It's surely one of the most barbaric practices any human culture has ever developed: the killing of relatives (the vast majority of them female, and in most cases young daughters) for the crime of 'dishonoring' the family.

The United Nations has estimated that around 5,000 honor killings take place each year, but since many occur in isolated rural areas and aren't reported to authorities, it's likely that the real figure is much higher. In many countries, the practice is so socially accepted that murderers are treated leniently, or not punished at all. In countries like Pakistan and Yemen, for example, the killings are often ignored by police and prosecutors. In Syria, the legal code states that if a man catches a female relative having illicit sex with another man, and kills them (either just the woman or the partner as well), he is entitled to a reduced penalty of just two years in prison.

In these cultures, the women of the family are seen as representing its honor, so there is massive pressure on them to behave 'properly'. This means dressing modestly, never talking to men outside the

family, never attracting attention to themselves, and most importantly of all, avoiding sex before marriage (or outside marriage, once they are wed) and agreeing to marry a partner chosen by their family. Other types of behaviour seen as 'dishonorable' for women - and therefore as punishable by death - include political activism, investigating other religions, and requesting a divorce. There have also been many cases of homosexual boys being killed to preserve the family 'honor.'

If a family member deviates from this code of behaviour, the family's reputation is sullied. The only way they can redeem themselves is by murdering the relative - again, usually the daughter - who has dishonored them. It doesn't matter if the relative is completely innocent. It could simply be that she's attractive, and so been shown attention by men outside the family; it could be that she lost her virginity by being raped. The fact that she has sullied the family's reputation is enough to justify murdering her. For example, Amnesty International reported a case in Turkey of a 16 year old girl who was murdered after her family heard a love song being dedicated to her on the radio. In Pakistan, a girl with learning difficulties was killed after being raped, even though the relative who raped her was found and prosecuted.

Honor killing is as incomprehensible as it is tragic. Why would seemingly sane people be willing to kill their own offspring - daughters they have conceived, given birth to and spent many years nurturing - for the sake of their reputation? It doesn't make any sense from an evolutionary point of view. If the Neo-Darwinian view of evolution is correct, human beings should be least likely to kill the people with whom they share most genes (i.e. their children). They should be willing to *die* for their children - or at least to nurture and protect them - not kill them. Like the puzzle of why human beings can be altruistic towards people - and other living creatures - with whom they have little genetic connection, honour killing seems to highlight shortcomings within Neo-Darwinian theory.

However, from a psychological and cultural point of view, there are some possible explanations. To a large extent, honor killings are linked to an extreme form of 'status anxiety' - the fear of losing status, and the desire to protect it. In the societies where it occurs, there is a pathological insecurity, a constant pressure to adhere to strict social conventions for fear of losing face, and of being ostracised by the rest of the community. There's a connection to social identity and the need for belonging. Disobeying social convention brings the risk of losing one's identity as a member of a particular social group.

Honor killings are clearly related to male domination too, and low female status. It's only possible for fathers to kill their own daughters - or brothers their own sisters - because they place a very low value of female life to begin with. If women were revered and respected, then no one would consider killing - or even abusing - them. It's no coincidence that many of the cultures which practice honor killing - for

example, India and Pakistan – also practice female infanticide. In these cultures, female life has negligible value, and so to destroy it is only a minor crime.

There's certainly a strong link to sexual repression too. In addition to the insanity of parents killing their own children, it also seems insane that most honor killings are a punishment for completely natural and healthy human instincts: the 'crime' of falling in love with a member of a different caste (which is often the cause of honour killings in India), or with a stranger not hand-picked by your parents, or the 'crime' of feeling sexual attraction and following this through to sex itself. Again, it's no coincidence that honor killings occur in societies which, in addition to being strongly patriarchal, have a high degree of sexual repression, and a neurotically hostile attitude to sex and the human body. It's difficult to imagine honor killings taking place if these cultures saw sex as a natural and health impulse, where sex before marriage was acceptable and there was no pressure for girls to remain virgins till marriage – just as it's impossible to imagine them taking place if females were valued as highly as males.

Like so many other 'insane' types of human behaviour – such as warfare, racism and materialism – honour killing ultimately stems from a sense of existential vulnerability and incompleteness. It's this sense of lack which creates the need for belonging and status, and the paranoid fear of losing them. As I suggest in my new book *Back to Sanity* the only sure way of correcting this pathological behaviour is for human beings to develop a more secure and stable sense of self, and to begin to develop an inner harmony and wholeness.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/out-the-darkness/201205/the-madness-honor-killing>

Courtesy: **Psychology Today**



What is the Soul, Anyway?

The Problem of Identity and the Impossibility of Immortality

Michael Shermer

In an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* titled “Second Chances,” Commander William Riker of the starship *Enterprise* beams down to a planet to retrieve data from a research station he visited eight years before when he was a lieutenant on board the starship *Potemkin*. There he discovers an exact duplicate of himself, the product of the *Potemkin*’s transporter beam accidentally being split into two and materializing a second Riker after the original beamed back to the ship. Lieutenant Riker remained stranded on the planet while the other continued his life trajectory in Starfleet where he moved up the ranks to Commander Riker, now on the *Enterprise*. DNA and brain scans of the two Rikers reveal that they are genetically identical and neurologically indistinguishable. They are true duplicates. Lieutenant Riker’s lover before the transporter mishap, Counselor Deanna Troi, is no longer romantically involved with Commander Riker on the *Enterprise*, and much of the episode plays out the awkwardness of experiencing and re-experiencing the break-up for the two Rikers and Troi. In the end Lieutenant Riker is assigned a post on a different ship and adopts his middle name as his first in order to distinguish himself from his new-found twin.

Were the two Rikers two different people or duplicates of one person? If they were true duplicates, did they subsequently become two different persons the moment they started leading separate lives and forming new memories and identities? This is the essence of the *identity problem* and it is vital to solve for all resurrection scenarios, both religious and scientific.

The identity problem was first articulated by the ancient Greek scholar Plutarch in his thought experiment known as the “ship of Theseus.” According to the myth, Poseidon’s son Theseus sailed to Crete where he slayed the half-man/half-bull Minotaur monster. After his triumphant return to Athens, Theseus’ ship was preserved in memoriam. As the vessel aged, however, the decaying wood was gradually replaced with new timber until eventually the entire ship was made of different material. Was it still Theseus’s ship?

The answer depends on how you define the true identity of a thing—as the pattern or the material. If Theseus’s ship is represented by the pattern, then replacing all its lumber does not alter its identity. If the ship’s distinctiveness is held in the material of which it is made, however, or in some combination of pattern and material, then altering the physical structure changes the identity in some manner. But how much would need to be exchanged before it was no longer the same “thing,” no longer Theseus’s ship?

Take our bodies. In addition to the replacement of atoms, molecules, cells, tissues, and organs every few years, there are a huge number of “foreign” cells inside us that contain no human DNA or RNA—bacteria that produce chemicals that enable our bodies to process the energy and nutrients in the food we eat, others that boost immunity, and still others whose function remains mysterious. More identity-shattering still, it appears that the complex eukaryotic cells of which we are made evolved billions of years ago from much simpler prokaryotic cells in a process the evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis calls symbiogenesis—the cooperative union of primitive simple prokaryotic cells into modern complex eukaryotic cells. The membrane-bound mitochondria organelles inside our cells that are so vital to the processing of energy, for example, have their own DNA different from that found in the nucleus of the cell (the famous mitochondrial DNA from which our genetic heritage can be traced over millions of years). It is now commonly believed that around 1.5 billion years ago some of these free-living bacteria (prokaryotes) symbiotically cooperated to form the more complex eukaryotic cells that make up modern organisms like us. So if you go back far enough in evolutionary time even our cells are foreign. And yet we don’t feel like a collection of other organisms. We feel like a whole self. The pattern of biological information coded in our genome, and the neural synaptic arrays recorded in our brain’s connectome, assures this continuity of essence. You are still you across space and time, even though the material making you up changes. Our sense of identity remains intact despite the exchange of body stuff, so our uniqueness appears to be ingrained in the pattern more than the material.

By this analysis, would a duplicate of you also be you, even if it meant that there is more than one of you? In principle, yes, as long as each of the duplicates feels like an autonomous person. This is why, in addition to the *pattern* and the *material* of identity, there is an additional component: *personal perspective*. Every self-contained sentient being—by which I mean the capacity to be *emotive*, *perceptive*, *sensitive*, *responsive*, and *conscious*—has a *personal perspective*, and that is what makes each person an autonomous identity. By this definition, in the *Star Trek* scenario each Riker has his own personal perspective so each is his own person, in the same way that identical twins are two persons, both psychologically and legally. The moment you and your duplicate (or identical twin) begin to lead separate lives you are separate persons, not just because of the different perspectives but also because of the different experiences you have, forming distinct memories, personalities, and all the rest that goes into the make-up of your pattern of information.

The neurobiologist and philosopher Owen Flanagan summarizes the three primary characteristics of the soul:⁵ the *Unity of Experience* (a sense of self or “I”), *Personal Identity* (the feeling of being the same person over the course of a lifetime), and *Personal Immortality* (the survival of death). Polls consistently

show that between 70 and 96 percent of Americans believe in a soul as so characterized. The vast majority of people base such belief on religious faith, but science tells us that all three of these characteristics are illusions.

Unity of Experience

There is no unified “self” that generates internally consistent and seamlessly coherent beliefs devoid of conflict. Instead, we are a collection of distinct but interacting modules—or neural networks—that are often at odds with one another. According to the evolutionary psychologist Robert Kurzban the brain evolved as a modular multitasking problem-solving organ—a Swiss Army Knife of practical tools in the old metaphor, or an app-loaded iPhone in Kurzban’s upgrade. The module that leads us to crave sweet and fatty foods in the short-term, for example, is in conflict with the module that monitors our body image and health in the long-term. The module for cooperation is in conflict with the module for competition, as is the module for truth-telling and the module for lying. Of course, the brain does not sense itself operating so we are blissfully unaware of all these networks running largely independently of one another, so it feels like there is a unity of self.

Personal Identity

Scientists estimate that in the course of your lifetime most of the atoms in your body will be replaced by comparable atoms—hydrogen atoms most rapidly (given that our bodies consist of 72 percent water, which is two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen), then heavier elements such as carbon, sodium, and potassium. As atoms are replaced so too are molecules, cells, tissues, and organs, by some estimates on average every 7 to 10 years. There is a wide variation of the replacement process time, from a few days for the epithelial cells that line the gut, to a few weeks for the epidermis skin layer, to two months for red blood cells, to a year or two for liver cells, and 10 to 15 years for bone and muscle (exceptions appear to be neurons in the cerebral cortex, the inner lens cells of the eye, and heart muscle cells). So the belief that you are the same material person you were years ago—or will be years from now—is an illusion. At most what stays the same is the pattern of information, and even this changes over time.

Personal Immortality

We have already seen that there is no evidence for an afterlife as proposed by religionists, but what about a scientific immortality? The thought experiments above demonstrate that duplication is not an option for immortality unless there is a continuity of self from one duplicate to the next. When you fall asleep or go under general anesthesia for surgery, despite the disruption in consciousness of several hours you still feel like yourself when you wake up. How, exactly, would that happen if you were duplicated, replicated, resurrected, or uploaded? If a brain could be cryopreserved and reawakened after, say, a thousand years,

would it be the same as waking up from a long sleep? Maybe. What about a brain whose connectome of information is precisely recorded and uploaded into a computer? When it is turned on would the personal perspective of the person be in there? Maybe not.

The identity problem confronts both religious and nonreligious seekers of immortality. If you are religious and believe in the resurrection of the body or the soul in heaven, for example, how does God go about the duplication or transformation process to insure conscious continuity and personal perspective? Is it your atoms and patterns that are resurrected, or just the patterns? If both, and you are physically resurrected, does God reconstitute your body so it is no longer subject to disease and aging? If it is just the patterns of you that are resurrected, what is the platform that holds the information? Is there something in heaven that is the equivalent to a computer hard drive or the cloud? Is there some sort of heavenly quantum field that retains your thoughts and memories? If you are not religious (or even if you are) and hold out hope that one day scientists will be able to clone your body and duplicate your brain, or upload your mind into a computer, or create a virtual reality in which you come alive again, we face the same technological problems as God would of how this is to be done.

So our self is defined by our pattern of information as much as it is by the stuff of which we are made, and it is our personal perspective and our unique experiences that makes us autonomous selves regardless of how similar or dissimilar we are from others. This is the real you. This is your *soul*.

The sums involved in achieving immortality through the duplication or resurrection scenarios are not to be underestimated. There are around 85 billion neurons in a human brain, each with about a thousand synaptic links, for a total of 100 trillion connections to be accurately preserved and replicated. This is a staggering level of complexity made all the more so by the additional glial cells in the brain, which provide support and insulation for neurons and can change the actions of firing neurons, so these cells better be preserved as well in any duplication or resurrection scenario, just in case. Estimates of the ratio of glial cells to neurons in a brain vary from 1:1 to 10:1. If you're not a lightning calculator, that computes to a total brain cell count of somewhere between 170 billion and 850 billion. Then factor in the hundreds or thousands of synaptic connections between each of the 85 billion neurons, adding approximately 100 trillion synaptic connections total for each brain. That's not all. There are around ten billion proteins per neuron, which effect how memories are stored, plus the countless extra cellular molecules in between those tens of billions of brain cells.

These estimates are just for the brain and do not even include the rest of the nervous system outside of the skull—what neuroscientists call the “embodied brain” or the “extended mind” and which many

philosophers of mind believe is necessary for normal cognition. So you might want to have this extended mind resurrected or uploaded along with your mind. After all, you are not just your internal thoughts and emotions disconnected from your body. Many of your thoughts and emotions are intimately entwined with how your body interacts with its environment, so any preserved connectome, to be fully operational as recreating the experience of what it is like to be a sentient being, would also need to be housed in a body. So we would need a warehouse of brainless clones or very sophisticated robots prepared to have these uploaded mind neural units installed. How many? Well, to avoid the charge of elitism, it's only fair that everyone who ever lived be resurrected, so that means multiplying the staggering data package for one person by 108 billion.

Then there's the relationship between memory and life history. Our memory is not like a videotape that can be played back on the viewing screen of our minds. When an event happens to us, a selective impression of it is made on the brain through the senses. As that sense impression wends its way through different neural networks, where it ends up depends on what type of memory it is. As a memory is processed and prepared for long-term storage we rehearse it and in the process it is changed. This editing process depends on previous memories, subsequent events and memories, and emotions. This process recurs trillions of times in the course of a lifetime, to the point where we have to wonder if we have memories of actual events, or memories of the memories of those events, or even memories of memories.... What's the "true" memory? There is no such thing. Our memories are the product of trillions of synaptic neuronal connections that are constantly being edited, redacted, reinforced, and extinguished, such that a resurrection of a human with memories intact will depend on *when* in the individual's life history the replication or resurrection is implemented.

Most of our memories are lost over time, so when God, Omega, the Singularity, or far future Humans (GOSH) reconstructs the pattern of your memories, which ones actually represent you? The answer is *none*, *some*, and *all*. There is no coherently fixed individual in some absolute sense. Our self—our *soul*—consists of a constantly changing matrix of traits and memory patterns that are coherent enough for us to feel like we have a self/soul, and for others to treat us like we do, so a replicating entity must determine which set of patterns best represents our self/soul such that it would be recognizable to yourself and others. If GOSH resurrects you, for example, which of your memories will be included and from which point in your life? If it is a select set of memories at some point, say age 29, that's not all of you. If it is all of the memories you formed throughout your entire life that might be interesting (and revealing!) but this would not be what it is like to *be* you at any point in your life.

Finally, there is the problem of history and the lost past. I have defined history as “a conjuncture of events compelling a certain course of action by constraining prior events.” Most of those constraining prior events—contingencies and necessities, or chance and law—are not only lost to historians, they aren’t even apparent to those alive at the time. The problem of the irrecoverable past of both people and society is a serious one that any theory of immortality must solve. Even if GOSH could create a perfect replica of my genome and connectome, a human life is so much more than that. It is a product of all our *relations* with other people and *their life histories*, plus our interactions with all the elements in our *environment*, which is itself a product of countless systems and histories all wrapped up in a complex matrix with so many variables that it is inconceivable how any supercomputer or omnipotent deity could duplicate it all even if the information were available, which it isn’t.

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=wm#inbox/160e08c86c2ceac2>

Courtesy: **Skeptic**



How to Talk to a Science Denier without Arguing

A simple strategy with the acronym EGRIP can be surprisingly effective

Gleb Tsipursky

It’s the holiday season, which means plenty of opportunities for uncomfortable interactions with friends and family who are science deniers, from people who believe the moon landing was faked to those who believe vaccines cause autism or who think that humans did not cause significant global climate change. How can you deal with such science deniers effectively?

My close friend invited me to her house for Thanksgiving, where I sat across the table from her cousin Sam. Learning about my research on promoting truthfulness in our society, he proceeded to denounce what he called the “climate change hoax” as a vast attack by liberals on businesses. He told me how his dad lost his job at a factory that moved to Mexico, placing blame on government regulations—including pollution control—that made it too expensive for the plant to operate in the Columbus, Ohio, where Sam lives.

By the end of our conversation over that meal, he accepted the validity of the science on climate change. Sam is one of many people who updated their beliefs during conversations with me, including prominent ideologically-oriented talk show hosts. Recently, I published a book on this topic, *The Truth-*

Seeker's Handbook: A Science-Based Guide. One of the strategies described there can be summarized under the acronym EGRIP (Emotions, Goals, Rapport, Information, Positive Reinforcement), which provides clear guidelines on how to deal with Sam and other people who deny the facts, in science and other life areas.

What Not To Do

Our typical response is to respond by presenting the facts and arguing about the quality of the evidence. However, studies suggest that doing so is generally not effective in changing people's minds on charged issues. Research on the confirmation bias shows that we tend to look for and interpret information in ways that conforms to our beliefs. Our emotions are much more powerful than our reason, and we tend to go with our guts when perceiving new information.

Moreover, research on a phenomenon called the *backfire effect* shows when we are presented with facts that cause us to feel bad about our identity and worldview, we tend to dig in our heels and refuse to accept the facts. In some cases, presenting the facts actually backfires, causing people to develop a stronger attachment to their incorrect belief.

Don't Argue, EGRIP Instead

If someone denies clear facts, you can safely assume that it's their emotions that are leading them away from reality. While gut reactions can be helpful, they can also lead us astray in systematic and predictable ways. We need to deploy the skill of empathy, meaning understanding other people's emotions, to determine what emotional blocks might cause them to stick their heads into the sand of reality.

In Sam's case, it was relatively easy to figure out the emotions at play through active listening: anxiety about job security, compounded by his dad's experience. I confirmed my suspicions by using curiosity to question Sam—who was in his junior year in college—about whether he was concerned that government protections would inhibit his ability to find a job, and he answered “you're damn right I'm worried about that.” You will have to figure out based on the context of each individual situation the relevant emotions at play.

Next, establish shared goals for both of you, crucial for effective knowledge sharing. With Sam, I talked about how we both want people to secure jobs in the current uncertain economic environment, and he strongly agreed. I also said how we both want him and his friends and family—who were all around us at the Thanksgiving dinner table—to stay healthy, and he agreed as well.

Third, build rapport. Using the empathetic listening you did previously (a vital skill in promoting trusting relationships), echo their emotions and show you understand how they feel. In the case of Sam, I told him I understood his feelings of worry and anger. I also told him I was worried about his health and the health of other students, due to the hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by pollution. Finally, I added that we

should always orient toward the facts, wherever they may lead, and added that I—along with thousands of other citizens—took the Pro-Truth Pledge as a public signal of commitment to sharing accurate information, and welcomed him to hold me accountable. He appreciated that opportunity, and it built my credibility in his eyes.

Fourth, move on to sharing information. Here is where you can give the facts that you held back in the beginning. Since Sam's concerns had to do with economic issues, I focused on the money rather than the science. I talked to him about how while I did not know the specifics of his dad's situation, I could truthfully state that the government sometimes makes unwise policies that result in harmful outcomes. Next, I pointed out to him how the number of clean energy jobs in Ohio is growing, and much quicker than overall job growth; given bipartisan support, this trend will likely continue. Then, I highlighted how since manufacturing jobs like the one his dad had aren't coming back, he could secure a good financial future for himself in the green energy field after college.

Likewise, he would also help protect his health and the health of his friends and family around the dinner table. As a bonus, he wouldn't have to deny scientific studies. After all, as I told him, the scientists are simply finding data, and it's government officials and business leaders who decide what to do with it. The key here is to show your conversation partner, without arousing a defensive or aggressive response, how their current truth denialism will lead to them undermining in the long term the shared goals we established earlier, a research-driven approach to addressing thinking errors.

Sam was surprised and moved by this information. He agreed that green energy might well be a good future for him. He confessed he was feeling mental strain due to denying scientific findings, and was relieved to see that believing in science did not have to mean he would not find a job. I offered positive reinforcement for his orientation toward the facts, praising his ability to update his beliefs. Positive reinforcement is very valuable as a research-based tactic of encouraging people to change their identity and sense of self-worth to align with truthfulness through associating positive emotions with doing so.

Think of how much better your holiday dinner could go if you use EGRIP instead of arguing!

https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/how-to-talk-to-a-science-denier-without-arguing/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=weekly-review&utm_content=link&utm_term=2017-12-13_top-stories

Courtesy: Scientific American



Where's the Proof That Mindfulness Meditation Works?

Bret Stetka

The concept of mindfulness involves focusing on your present situation and state of mind. This can mean awareness of your surroundings, emotions and breathing—or, more simply, enjoying each bite of a really good sandwich. Research in recent decades has linked mindfulness practices to a staggering collection of possible health benefits.

Tuning into the world around you may provide a sense of well-being, an array of studies claim. Multiple reports link mindfulness with improved cognitive functioning. One study even suggests it may preserve the tips of our chromosomes, which whither away as we age.

Yet many psychologists, neuroscientists and meditation experts are afraid that hype is outpacing the science. In an article released this week in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15 prominent psychologists and cognitive scientists caution that despite its popularity and supposed benefits, scientific data on mindfulness is woefully lacking. Many of the studies on mindfulness and meditation, the authors wrote, are poorly designed—compromised by inconsistent definitions of what mindfulness actually is, and often void of a control group to rule out the placebo effect.

The new paper cites a 2015 review published in *American Psychologist* reporting that only around 9 percent of research into mindfulness-based interventions has been tested in clinical trials that included a control group. The authors also point to multiple large placebo-controlled meta-analyses concluding that mindfulness practices have often produced unimpressive results. A 2014 review of 47 meditation trials, collectively including over 3,500 participants, found essentially no evidence for benefits related to enhancing attention, curtailing substance abuse, aiding sleep or controlling weight.

Lead author of the report Nicholas Van Dam, a clinical psychologist and research fellow in psychological sciences at the University of Melbourne, contends potential benefits of mindfulness are being overshadowed by hyperbole and oversold for financial gain. Mindfulness meditation and training is now a \$1.1-billion industry in the U.S. alone. “Our report does not mean that mindfulness meditation is not helpful for some things,” Van Dam says. “But the scientific rigor just isn’t there yet to be making these big claims.” He and his co-authors are also concerned that as of 2015, less than 25 percent of meditation trials included monitoring for potential negative effects of the intervention, a number he would like to see grow as the field moves forward.

Van Dam acknowledges that some good evidence does support mindfulness. The 2014 analysis found meditation and mindfulness may provide modest benefits in anxiety, depression and pain. He also cites a

2013 review published in *Clinical Psychology Review* for mindfulness-based therapy that found similar results. “The intention and scope of this review is welcome—it is looking to introduce rigor and balance into this emerging new field,” says Willem Kuyken, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Oxford in England, who was not involved in research for the new report. “There are many areas where mindfulness-based programs seem to be acceptable and promising, but larger scale randomized, rigorous trials are needed.”

Two trials published earlier this month in *Science Advances* also support mindfulness practices. The first found mindfulness-like attention training reduces self-perceived stress, but not levels of the hormone cortisol, a commonly used biological gauge of stress levels. The other trial links mindfulness-like attention training to increases in thickness of the prefrontal cortex, a brain region associated with complex behavior, decision-making and shaping personality. The authors called for further research into what these findings could mean clinically.

Van Dam characterizes the research methods used in both of these studies as sound. Yet he points out both also represent the field’s larger problem—a lack of standardization. Varying mindfulness-like approaches have been investigated over the years, making comparisons of different studies difficult

Mindfulness is rooted in Buddhist thought and theory. In the West it was popularized in the 1970s by University of Massachusetts professor Jon Kabat-Zinn, a cognitive scientist who founded the university’s Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine. Kabat-Zinn developed what he called “mindfulness-based stress reduction,” an alternative therapy for a variety of often difficult-to-treat conditions. By the early 2000s, the concept of mindfulness had ballooned in popularity. It soon came to have many differing meanings and varying approaches to treatment. “We specifically commented in our article on the fact that many continue to develop novel interventions without fully evaluating those that are already being implemented,” Van Dam says. “I think these studies, while well-designed, may fit within the category of being just different enough from what we already have to prevent us from really knowing whether we could use these results as evidence for [the effectiveness of] other mindfulness-based practices.”

As Van Dam and his co-authors wrote, “[there is] neither one universally accepted technical definition of ‘mindfulness’ nor any broad agreement about detailed aspects of the underlying concept to which it refers.”

“Overall, I suspect that a large number of the health promises will not be fulfilled, mostly because therapies, phone apps and other interventions are being rushed to market without sufficiently rigorous testing and appropriate implementation,” he says. “But given what we’ve seen to date, I suspect evidence may accumulate supporting mindfulness practices for anxiety, depression and stress-related conditions.”

Behavioral and social sciences professor and director of Brown University's Mindfulness Center Eric Loucks, who was not involved in researching the new paper, agrees there are multiple definitions of mindfulness. But it is the trickiness in bringing a rich spiritual concept into a standardized framework for testing and advising patients that he feels might be tough to tackle.

"One element in defining mindfulness, if considering its roots in Buddhism, is...the Buddha's recommendation that descriptions of concepts like 'mindfulness' are like a finger pointing at the moon," he explains. "It is important not to confuse the finger for the moon. There will always be variations in people's understanding of mindfulness. It is a personal experience."

https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/wheres-the-proof-that-mindfulness-meditation-works1/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=weekly-review&utm_content=link&utm_term=2017-10-18_top-stories

Courtesy: **Scientific American**



Beyond the Ugly Practices of Organised Religion

Avijit Pathak

Why is it that everything is upside down, and all that happens in the name of religion is divisive, oppressive and morally repugnant?

What can I do my friends, if I do not know?

I am neither Christian nor Jew, nor Muslim nor Hindu.

What can I do?

My place is the placeless. My trace is the traceless.

~ Jalaluddin Rumi

It is not easy to write about the religion of man, particularly at a time when all sorts of ugly practices are legitimised in the name of faith. However, only at the hour of darkness does the need for the light of being acquires special importance. True, organised/institutionalised religions often cause fear – the fear of sin or the fear of bad *karma* – and encourage the orthodoxies of the priest craft. As a result, popular religion, despite many reform movements – from *bhakti* to *sufi*, from Zen to Protestantism – remain obsessively ritualistic; the outer performance becomes more important than inner cleansing. Move around the *ghats* of Haridwar, see the power of the priests and the trap of ritualism, and feel how the outer bath with soaps and detergent keeps polluting the 'sacred' river while the purification of soul is simply forgotten. Again, as we

are witnessing in our times, religion is negatively politicised; faith becomes an ideology; socially engineered, manipulative practices of exclusion and hatred are popularised in the name of cultural nationalism, religious fundamentalism, terrorism and fixed identity markers like triple *talaq* or cow vigilantism. Furthermore, in the age of market-induced consumption, religion becomes a spectacle. Yet, despite all these unholy manifestations of religion (be it the Ayodhya syndrome further intensifying the trauma of Partition with its political engineering of Hindu-Muslim divide or the state-sponsored celebrity guru with his 'art of living' spectacle causing massive environmental damage to the Yamuna river in Delhi), there is no reason to believe that we cannot have a deeper quest for the light of being – the light that illumines, enchants and helps us to create a better world. It is in this context that I refer to three existential issues which are immensely important for the cultivation of the religion of man – the religion that no bounded systems like Christianity or Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism can possess and capture.

To be truly religious is to be revolutionary

When you look for me, you will find me instantly

You will find me in the tiniest house of time.

Kabir says: "Student, tell me, what is God?"

He is the breath inside the breath."

~ Kabir

To begin with, as I would argue, man's religiosity begins with a sense of wonder and mystery. The very fact that we find ourselves in this vast universe amidst all sorts of miracles leads to a sense of wonder. Even though modern science demystifies the world, the fact is that the realisation of just being one amongst many, or this feeling of finitude in this infinite canvas leads to a sense of gratitude. This is man's inherent prayer – the urge to see beyond the limitedness of one's embodied existence and experience the glimpses of the infinite. In a way, this is the aesthetics of religiosity. There is something deep about this prayer; it is for merger and surrender; it is not for what the priests ask us to do all the time – perform this *puja*, visit the church every Sunday morning, offer *namaz* five times a day, and pray for your son's job, daughter's marriage and your career upliftment.

Second, religiosity emanates from the reality of death and subsequent realisation of the temporality of existence. This constant interplay of life and death, creation and destruction, appearance and disappearance, substance and void, form and formlessness takes us to a realm of existential crisis. Although modern medicine seeks to declare war against death, or in our times we try to see it as ugly, and separate it from life by taking it to the insulation of the Intensive Care Unit of a mega hospital, it haunts us. Is there any meaning to life if everything we are so deeply attached to is eventually reduced into

nothingness? At one level, as we see in existential philosophies, it causes a sense of the absurd or meaninglessness. However, deep religiosity emanates from the very acknowledgement that all that is created is temporal; and it is only the infinite (or the real substance in the eternal void, which has no beginning, no end) that transcends our temporal existence. To live meaningfully is, as the likes of Nachiketa and Buddha, Tolstoy and Tagore would have said, is to experience this transcendence even amidst all earthly activities, is to live with awareness and light even amidst physical pain and separation from the loved ones.

Third, this intense awareness – the temporality of earthly existence or the futility of an inflated ego in the presence of the infinite – helps one to cultivate the psychic/spiritual qualities like love and forgiveness, empathy and compassion, non-possessiveness and ethic of care. For a mind of this kind, it does not matter whether God exists in this temple or that mosque because she/he realises that God is essentially about love, has no measurement, and is everywhere. In a way, the truly religious mind is radical; sharing and togetherness, ecological harmony and egalitarianism characterise his/her very existence.

Hard times and the lamp within

Music heard so deeply

That it is not heard at all, but you are the music.

~ T.S. Eliot

But then why is it that everything is upside down, and all that happens in the name of religion is divisive, oppressive and morally repugnant? One possible reason is that organised religious groups alter the practice of religion from a personal quest to a conformist crowd behavior with rituals, badges and centralised authorities – fixed books, fixed prophets, fixed beliefs. Furthermore, instrumental/competitive politics taps this human vulnerability for identity-based mobilisation leading to the erection of huge walls and boundaries: I am a Hindu, you are a Muslim; I am a Christian, you are a Jew, and never can we meet. Another reason is the process of routinisation of charisma. The ecstasy of the prophet is lost, and the symbol is used for a hugely bureaucratic/hierarchical religious organisation. Jesus is lost in the Vatican, Muhammed is forgotten because of the power of the clergy, and Rama cannot exist amongst the *mahants* in the temples of Ayodhya.

However, it is equally important to realise that shallow secularism with reductionist science is no less violent. It too becomes a kind of orthodox religion in the name of scientism, developmentalism, Marxism and nationalism. In fact, secular war is no less threatening than religious war. Hence, the real task is to restore the true religiosity of man. At a time when religion means nasty symbolism of Gujarat elections, the bitterness among non-reflexive pandits and *mullahas* of Ayodhya, the criminality of the Ram Rahims of the

world, the packaging of yoga and Ayurveda in the global market by television-friendly gurus and *babas*, and the heavily priced lecture series on the Bhagavad Gita organised in lavish five star hotels for the corporate elite, the revolution of true religiosity I am talking about may sound utopia, a poetic dream. However, it is only in darkness that you and I ought to strive for the lamp of illumination that we carry within our souls.

<https://thewire.in/203891/beyond-ugly-practices-organised-religion/>

Courtesy: The Wire



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Training Course in Exorcism

Dr. Hamid Dabholkar

Vatican City is considered as the most sacred place for Christian religion. The highest authority of Christian religion, Pope resides at Vatican City. Priests from various parts of world are offered training around religious matters at Vatican City. Recently, 'Vatican City' has stirred a controversy by announcing a training course in exorcism. The main aim of this course is, to train priests in how to address problems of people allegedly possessed by ghosts and other demonic powers. The belief in the supernatural, ghosts and demonic powers is not new to Christianity. Demonstration of ability to perform miracles is one of the important criteria for declaration of sainthood in Christianity. Mother Teresa was bestowed the saint hood on basis of the same claims of performing miracles. Rationalist all over world had opposed this move of church. The church, without paying any heed to their opposition continued with the same criteria as requirement for the saint hood.

The current move by the Vatican City of the announcing the course on exorcism looks like an attempt to take back Christianity to pre renaissance era and hence needs a serious scrutiny. The reason offered by Vatican City sources to start course on exorcism is that the demand from the community for such courses. It is reported that, only in Italy, more than 50000 individuals seek help at Church for the issues like position by ghosts or trouble due to demonic powers. If we take into the account the entire Europe then the figures may reach a million. With recent advances in brain sciences and psychiatry one can easily understand the reason why so many people are seeking help with such problems. What is difficult to comprehend is, why the Church has opted to provide them with such a primitive form of help. With recent advances in brain sciences and psychiatry we can very well understand that there can be individuals affected by illnesses in which one can hear unreal voices and see unreal images. This can happen in mental health conditions like schizophrenia. Affected individuals can hear voices and see images without any stimulus due to disturbances in brain chemistry. Families and individuals who are unaware of such illness can refer these experiences as extrasensory perceptions and can seeking help of exorcism due to ignorance and misbeliefs around such experiences. Individuals facing increase in stress levels due to financial, occupational or relationship issues are also vulnerable for belief in extraterrestrial causes for their suffering. Externalizing reasons for our suffering represents innate tendency human mind. A good faith should encourage people to explore the real reason of his suffering and empower individuals to address them. The solution offered by Church for above condition can very well be considered as misleading to the individuals. If the church really wants to help these individuals then the priests

should be trained into basics of human brain and human mind. The scientific basis of why certain individuals have such experiences and how to encourage them to seek help of mental health experts.

There is a long history to church of backing up such unscientific things. Almost three thousand years ago, when Galileo, based on his observations busted the myth of, “The earth being at the center of universe and proved that the Earth rotates around the sun and not vice versa”, instead of congratulating him the church sentenced him to death. Letter on Galileo managed to convert his death penalty into a life sentence by extending an apology to the church. Three hundred years later the church has to apologize to Galileo for the mistake they have made. This was very welcome gesture on behalf of Church and the dignity of religion actually increased due to expression of such humility by Church. Science is always humble and ready to learn from its mistakes. If, Vatican City does not want repeat the mistake it had committed three hundred years ago, it should withdraw course on exorcism. Many scientists and authors like Richard Dawkin, Sam Harris have raised their voice against unscientific things in Christianity. Books like ‘A letter to Christian Nation’ or ‘End of Faith’ by Sam Harris are a must read for those who want to explore this subject. Pope Francis has a progressive mind set. He has expressed openness to discuss issues like homosexuality. Here comes, one more opportunity for the Church and the Pope to give a clear message about their support to scientific temperament.

In India also we have number of self proclaimed Goodman and religious leaders claiming that they can help people possessed by ghost or demonic powers through their supernatural capabilities. Maharashtra was the first Indian state to enact Anti Black Magic act in 2013 after two decade long struggle of Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti(MANS) and ultimate sacrifice by its leader Dr Narendra Dabholkar. This is the first of its kind act in which exploitation of a citizen on name of religion by claiming to have supernatural powers is considered as punishable offence. More than four hundred such self proclaimed Goodman who have exploited common citizen on name of religion are imprisoned under this act. Karnataka has also recently enacted this law. There are many other states e,g Punjab Hariyana, Bihar, Assam have also started some initiatives in this direction. Enactment of any black magic act can be considered as one of the very few examples where India is actually a step ahead of European countries as far as culture of scientific enquiry is concerned! MANS has an open challenge off Two million Rupees to any individual who can demonstrate existence of ghosts and demonic powers under scientific environment. If the church is not willing to withdraw its course then it should accept this challenge to prove the existence of demonic powers.

MANS is planning reach out all likeminded rationalist organizations across the globe join hands in the campaign against this unscientific course.

Democracy or 'Baba'cracy

Dr. Hamid Dabholkar

Madhya Pradesh government has recently announced that Computer Baba, Bhayujji Maharaj, Narmada Nand, Hari Haranand Pandit and Yogendra Mahant will lead the initiative of Narmada cleaning in capacity of state ministers. Surprisingly two of these newly appointed state ministers had announced a 'Narmada Ghotala Yatra' against the government. The aim of this Yatra was to expose the delay in cleaning of Narmada and failure to keep promise of planting six core samplings on the banks of Narmada. Needless to say, this coopting by the government has successfully defused the 'Narmada Ghotala Yatra'.

Mixing of religion and politics is not a new thing to us but Shivrajshing Chauhan government is scaling this thing to totally different heights! We are rapidly heading to a Babacracy from the democracy. No need to dig deep to find out the credentials of these Babas. Mr. Namdev Das Tyagi proudly calls himself 'Computer Baba' because of his love for computers and modern gadgets. He also claims that his memory is similar to a computer. But nobody in MP government has even bothered to ask him a simple question that, 'if his memory is like a computer, then why he needs a separate computer with him all the time?'. If an individual can be 'Computer Baba' for use of computer then by this logic there can be millions of computer Baba and Ammas in our country! Another self-proclaimed saint is Bhayujji Maharaj. He has enjoyed proximity to BJP and Congress both in the past. Last year he has announced retirement from the spiritual field publically and has also filed a FIR of attempt of murder. He is known for his lavish life style which is far from the life style that goes with ascetic individuals.

If we look at this incidence in light of the recent large scale scandals related to Babas and Ammas then this trend looks more worrisome.

'Asaram' is in the jail for last four years and more than ten witnesses in the case are murdered under suspicious circumstances. The havoc created by the 'Ram Rahim' and 'Rampal' followers is also not very distant past. The cases of sexual exploitation against Virendra Dixit in a high plush Delhi is also very recent. By any stretch of imagination, I do not want to claim that all the Babas and Ammas are fraudulent but the way these cults are organized and their proximity to the politics is making scrutiny of any of their deeds almost impossible and potentially life threatening proposition.

The exploitation of the community in above mentioned cases is very visible but the proximity of Big cults lead by Shri Shri Ravi Shankar , Ramdev Baba ,Jaggi Vasudeo also warrants a special mention. The rise of Patanjali Brand in the current rule can easily considered as a religion augmented model of corny capitalism. The hand in glove relationship of Patanjali with the government is so obvious that it may not warrant separate proof. The danger it creates for the system of democracy is development of almost parallel governing system which is not open for any scrutiny .We all have witnessed its potential for creating threat to government in Ramrahim and Rampal cases and hence it warrants a serious attention.

We have diverged too far from the principle of separation of politics and religion in Indian constitution. The opposition by Pandit Nehru to then President of India Rajendra Prasad for his decision to attend Somanth temple renovation ceremony stating that its can show religious affiliation of a constitutional post looks like an imaginable thing in current era. Like Pandit Nehru, Babasaheb Ambedkar was also a passionate advocate for separation of religion and politics .The principle of secular state is one of the core principles of Indian constitution. As per this principle, an individual has a right to choose his/her religion and faith but the government should always remain neutral to any faith. BJP not sticking to secular principles is not surprising, but the fall of Congress from Jawaharlal Nehru days to Rahul Gandhi doing rounds of Temples as part of election campaign is a serious down fall. This transition is not sudden. If we look back in the past, we can see ample examples of Congress leadership's proximity to Baba and Ammas. Indira Gandhi was a keen follower of Dharendra Brahmachari, P.V. Narsinha Rao was known for his proximity with Chandra Swami and Sonia Gandhi, Shivraj Patil Sushil Kumar Shinde were all followers of Satya Sai Baba, who used to show a simple trick of taking golden chain out of thin air under disguise of miracle.

If we look at this course of development then the reasons for murder of Dr.Dabholkar, Comrade Pansare, Prof.Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh who opposed fraudulent practices on the name of religion and demanded separation of state from religion does not appear mystery. The delay in investigation of these murders in BJP and Congress both rules also becomes explainable.

In era of populist politics is it difficult to imagine politicians will stop collaborating with Babas and Ammas unless the community at large start expressing their displeasure about the BABA and Amma office of profit .As citizens we need to understand that , though Indian constitution has given us right to practice our faith it has also shouldered us with responsibility to inculcate scientific temperament, spirit of inquiry and humanism. If we keep on exercising our rights and fail to execute our responsibility then fall of democracy to Babacracy will become inevitable.

Industrial Air Pollution Clean-Up Is On Its Way In 2018

John Hawthorne

Since 1955, the United States government has recognized the need for legislation to clean up air pollution. Subsequent revisions to the initial legislation strengthened the laws regarding allowable amounts of car emissions, factory smog, and other sources of air pollution.

The most recent version, The Clean Air Act of 1990, tackled five areas: air-quality standards, motor vehicle emissions and alternative fuels, toxic air pollutants, acid rain, and stratospheric ozone depletion.

But now, in 2018, it isn't just legislation and governments fighting air pollution. Private inventors, corporations, and other organizations are harnessing the technology that can aid in cleaning our air all over the world, along with recognizing that some advances in technology are creating more air pollution.

Technology Is Causing Air Pollution

While it's true that technology is being used to clean up air pollution, it's also been the primary cause.

No technological wonder has caused more air pollution than the horseless carriage. Nearly half of Americans—150 million—live in cities that fail to meet federally designated air quality standards. Cars, vans, trucks, and heavy-duty vehicles (think dump trucks and backhoes) are the primary sources of such pollution, which includes the release of excess ozone, release of particulate matter, and release of other smog-forming emissions.

Air pollution health effects need to be taken seriously. Bad air increases respiratory disorders like asthma and bronchitis. Air pollution also increases the risk of life-threatening health conditions, such as cancer, and burdens health care systems with substantial medical costs. Particulate matter alone is responsible for up to 30,000 deaths a year.

Industrial pollution is another primary source of air pollution. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), air pollution levels from 1990 to 2008 increased 14 percent. This trend mirrors the number of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions in the air. Air pollution has serious effects on the health of the planet and its population.

Factories pollute the air mostly through fossil fuel emissions. Fossil fuel emissions include methane, carbon dioxide, and nitrous oxide. While these are naturally-occurring substances, the extremely high levels of emissions are the main concern. Industrial methods also emit manmade emissions of fluorine-containing gases like hydrofluorocarbons.

Aerosols are another significant source of air pollution. There are many countries, starting with the United States, which are making significant progress in cutting down on air pollution that is directly related to aerosols.

How Technology Has Helped Decrease Air Pollution in Recent Years

Thankfully, we've already made some steps toward cutting the amount of air pollution, and it's critical that we continue to do so.

The environmental effects of air pollution mean the destruction of oxygen producing plants and damage to long-term forest viability, deterioration of nutrients in the soil, toxins making their way into the food chain, killing and damage of aquatic life in streams, rivers, and lakes, and nitrogen overload in coastal estuaries leading to oxygen depletion and harm to fish and other aquatic animals.

Reducing air pollution has so many benefits! Clean air increases timber and crop yields, and better visibility conditions in 2010 in selected national parks and large cities had an impact of saving \$34 billion.

Solar energy has been an alternative source of electricity for decades, though it is not widely used. Sunlight that reaches Earth's surface provides, "...10,000 times more energy than we consume, and solar power aims to harness this force." Solar technologies use sunlight captured through solar cells to provide electricity for heating, cooling, and even running small electronics like a calculator.

Researchers have determined that if we covered only 0.1 percent of the Earth's surface with efficient solar cells, we could replace all other forms of energy. University researchers around the world are trying to develop advanced solar arrays using nanotechnology. Their hope is to harness the sun as our primary form of energy.

The EPA, since the early millennia, has mandated significant reductions in emissions from newer cars, vans, trucks, and non-road engines like those used in construction, agriculture, and industry, as well as trains and marine ships. They called for these changes using standards that combine cleaner fuels and cleaner engine technologies. Since the EPA began regulating through the 1970 Clean Air Act, emissions from all types of vehicles have been reduced from 90-99%.

This led to the development of the electric car and hybrid vehicles. They were first made noticeable by celebrity owners, but now the everyday drivers' worries about increasing gas prices and the damage fossil fuels have on the environment, have created a demand and market for hybrids.

Sales of hybrid cars like Toyota's Prius, doubled in January 2006 compared to the year before, with nearly 16,000 cars sold. Hybrids are built with smaller gasoline engines, electric motors, and

rechargeable batteries. They deliver outstanding gas mileage and create far less air pollution than traditional vehicles.

In newly built plants that use coal as fuel, builders must install control devices that “capture up to 98 percent of the sulfur dioxide and in many cases 90 percent of the nitrogen oxide emissions, relative to uncontrolled levels.”

Clean technologies are being introduced and old tech is being improved. Though catalysts, scrubbers, and low-VOC paints and coatings were not used in 1970, they have been proven to be effective and are widely deployed today across industries.

Some examples include:

- Selective catalytic reduction (SCR)
- Scrubbers which achieve 95 percent and even greater SO₂ control on boilers
- Sophisticated new valve seals and leak detection equipment, including cameras that can see leaks, for refineries and chemical plants
- Low or zero VOC paints, consumer products and cleaning processes
- Chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) and hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFC)-free air conditioners, refrigerators, aerosol sprays and cleaning solvents
- Water and powder-based coatings to replace petroleum-based formulations
- Market penetration of gas-electric hybrid vehicles and clean fuels
- Routine use of continuous monitoring technology that provides data more quickly
- Multi-pollutant monitors that helps us to better understand the complex nature of air pollution

New Technology to Control Air Pollution

One of the newest technologies to spring up recently is artist Daan Roosegaarde’s Smog Free Tower. Roosegaarde traveled to Beijing in 2014, and from his hotel room on the 32nd floor, he could not see the city. “It was all gone,” Roosegaarde says. “The city was completely covered with smog.”

Now, he is on tour with the world’s largest, and most impressive, air purifier. The Smog Free Tower will make bubbles of clean air wherever they are placed. Roosegaarde hopes his product will raise public awareness of the dangers of air pollution.

Through ion technology, the Smog Free Tower attracts and absorbs small pollution particles — PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ — and blows out clean air, leaving a 75% improvement in the air quality.

The tower is seven-meters high and cleans approximately 30,000 cubic meters of air every hour, the equivalent of “a small neighborhood a day,” notes Roosegaarde. One of its most positive qualities is that it requires only 1,400 watts of power — no more than a tea kettle.

Since the late 1990s, the EPA has required industrial plants to lower their emissions. This led to scrubbers. These pollution reduction devices are capable of removing toxic substances from exhaust streams or may neutralize them into harmless or even recyclable substances.

Another industrial pollution reduction option is Baghouses. These are filtration structures that have been retrofitted to power plants across the country. They catch fine particulates—tiny levels of soot, dirt, and chemicals that damage lungs and create smog. Baghouses are like huge vacuum cleaners. They are lined with fabric filter “bags,” that are routinely cleaned or replaced.

Another type of air pollution reduction device is Bioreactors. This differs from the large-scale devices used in most industrial plants because “scientists are experimenting with tiny, simple living organisms called cyanobacteria that eat polluting carbon dioxide (CO₂).” While most living organisms could never survive a smokestack, these algae flourish in the sweltering temperatures of industrial chimneys.

So, researchers designed “bioreactors.” These window-screen membranes are teeming with cyanobacteria and will be installed into power plant smokestacks in the near future. The light needed to sustain the algae would come from fiber-optic cables streaming light across the membranes. The algae will grow inside the chimneys while gorging on CO₂ exhaust.

Finally, we can look to a technology that is already up and running: Biodiesel. This fuel alternative comes from any vegetable oil—including recycled vegetable oil from restaurants—and can power most diesel-engine vehicles without modification.

Since 2005, 75 million gallons have been sold in the United States, and many government vehicles use it as fuel. While it burns 78 percent cleaner than oil-based diesel, it is twice as expensive, and availability is scattered. Although only a fraction of US vehicles run on diesel, new fuel-efficient models on the market continue to gain in popularity.

What WE can do to Clean Up Air Pollution

As consumers, we can help by encouraging companies to use the clean air technologies available to them. These companies and corporations are in the business of making money. If consumers stop buying their products because they aren’t taking pollution seriously, they will go down the drain themselves.

We can also help by investing in alternative energy options like wind, solar, and hybrid vehicles. Such investments would not only help in reducing pollution of all kinds, but ultimately, these investments

will pay for themselves and save money for Americans in the long-term. We have the power to make positive changes in air pollution.

<https://www.airpollutioncontrolequipment.com/industrial-air-pollution-clean-up-is-on-its-way-in-2018/>

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“The worst illiterate is the political illiterate. He hears nothing, sees nothing, takes no part in political life. He doesn’t seem to know that the cost of living, the price of beans, of flour, of rent, of medicines all depend on political decisions. He even prides himself on his political ignorance, sticks out his chest and says he hates politics. He doesn’t know, the imbecile, that from his political non-participation comes the prostitute, the abandoned child, the robber and, worst of all, corrupt officials, the lackeys of exploitative multinational corporations.”

~BERTOLT BRECHT

Science and Pseudoscience

Harriet Hall, M.D.

We live in a post-truth, anti-intellectual world where intuition, “common sense,” and fake news are often preferred to scientific evidence, and where pseudoscience is often presented as valid science. Assuming that truth exists and is worth searching for, and that science is our most reliable tool in that search, how can we identify pseudoscience and combat it effectively?

Allison B. Kaufman and James C. Kaufman have edited a collection of articles with the title **Pseudoscience: The Conspiracy Against Science**. The contributors are experts in various fields who have different approaches to the subject. The result is an invaluable volume that examines the cognitive biases that lead to pseudoscience, the history of pseudoscience, the reasons for its wide acceptance, how it is endangering our society, how to recognize it, and how we might reduce its impact.

In the first chapter, David Hecht argues that understanding pseudoscience is as important as debunking it. Science and pseudoscience are opposite ends of one spectrum; we can easily identify the extremes, but there is no clear line separating them. Pseudoscientific beliefs are not as random or indefensible as they seem, and science is not as objective and detached as we like to think. Science is powerful but imperfect; and until we understand its limitations, we shouldn't condemn those who choose not to trust it. We must avoid dogmatism and remember that scientific knowledge is always provisional.

In a chapter titled “The Psychology of (Pseudo) Science: Cognitive, Social, and Cultural Factors,” Emilio Lobato and Corinne Zimmerman show that pseudoscientific and scientific beliefs are essentially formed in the same way and are subject to the same cognitive biases and social influences. In a chapter on “The Illusion of Causality: A Cognitive Bias Underlying Pseudoscience,” Fernando Blanco and Helena Matute explain the psychology of causal illusions and argue that they are one of the central problems underlying pseudoscience. Other chapters discuss what pseudoscience costs society, factors that affect scientific soundness, pseudoscience in the mainstream, and science activism.

David Gorski explains how the misguided concept of “integrative” medicine has allowed the infiltration of quackery into academia, taking advantage of the blind spot of evidence-based medicine: biological plausibility. Britt Marie Hermes, a former naturopath turned whistleblower, deconstructs the core principles of naturopathy. Kevin Folta examines the weapons and tactics in the war on crop biotechnology. Chad Orzel argues that scientific failures like cold fusion and the

report of faster-than-light neutrinos are a good thing: they demonstrate how science responds to criticism and corrects its mistakes, while pseudoscience fails to engage meaningfully with criticism. Other chapters examine the science and pseudoscience behind the anti-vaccine movement, IQ tests, hypnosis, parapsychology, AIDS denialism, over-protection of children, and the challenges of changing minds. There is an excellent discussion of predatory journals and the failures of peer review. And much more.

Indre Viskontas shows how confirmation bias and pattern recognition affect our search for meaning, and she explains the multiple comparisons issue. In neuroimaging, “By setting a statistical threshold fairly low and not correcting for multiple comparisons, one can find activation in virtually any part of the brain during any task.”

In the final chapter, “Truth Shall Prevail,” Paul Joseph Barnett and James C. Kaufman stress that scientists are searching for the truth, sometimes at great personal cost. “Humility, or a reticence to speak in absolutes, is the single greatest distinction between the sides of pseudoscience and evidence-based science.” They add, “Responding to pseudoscience takes its toll. Scientists get frustrated when they have to repeat facts, refute the same fallacious arguments, and end up in defensive positions because their detractors are not bound to the same rules. Like nuisance lawsuits, pseudoscience rarely plays to win; the goal is simply not to lose. Getting people to doubt science counts as a victory.”

We clearly have our work cut out for us, but truth will prevail in the end. In a foreword, psychologist Scott Lilienfeld summarizes the valuable lessons in this book:

- We are all subject to cognitive biases.
- We are largely unaware of our biases.
- Science is a systematic set of safeguards against biases.
- Scientific thinking doesn’t come naturally to humans.
- Scientific thinking is exasperatingly domain-specific. Even Nobel Prize winners can fall prey to pseudoscience in fields outside their area of expertise.
- Pseudoscience and science lie on a spectrum.
- Pseudoscience is characterized by a set of fallible, but useful, warning signs such as an absence of self-correction, overuse of ad hoc maneuvers to immunize claims from refutation, use of scientific-sounding but vacuous language, extraordinary claims in the absence of compelling evidence, over-reliance on anecdotal and testimonial assertions, avoidance of peer review, etc.

- Scientific claims can be wrong. Pseudoscientific claims differ from erroneous claims in that they are deceptive: they appear to be scientific, but they are not.
- Scientific and pseudoscientific thinking are cut from the same basic psychological cloth. Heuristics (mental shortcuts or rules of thumb) are invaluable in everyday life, but when misapplied they can lead to mistaken conclusions.
- Skepticism differs from cynicism. Skeptics must guard against dismissing implausible claims out of disconfirmation bias.

Lilienfeld concludes, “These lessons should also remind readers that we are all susceptible to questionable claims, and that science, although hardly a panacea, is ultimately our best bulwark against our own propensities toward irrationality.”

This is a long, dense, heavily referenced book. Some of the chapters are written in a more academic, rather dry style and even include (gasp!) equations. Others are more engaging. I especially enjoyed Kevin Folta’s creative and amusing use of language in his chapter on GMOs. Some examples:

- Plant genetic improvements put the petal to the metal.
- The unsinkable rubber duckies of pseudoscience.
- The scientific community yawned.
- What happens in the petri dish stays in the petri dish
- I can kill the most aggressive cancer cells in a dish with a hammer. It does not mean hammers cure cancer.
- A thin film of goo in a dish is not people.

Pseudoscientific leanings that are more like falling-overs.

This book is a tour-de-force, a compendium of vital information about science, especially as it pertains to current topics in the media, and about the forces that conspire against science. We all need to know about these things. We ignore them at our peril. The book is an excellent antidote to fake news and a handy reference. It’s not easy going, but it’s well worth the effort.

https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/pseudoscience-conspiracy-against-science-review/?utm_source=eSkeptic&utm_campaign=92d4e0de4a-

The Myth of the Indian Aviator

Lhendup G Bhutia

In the distant Mumbai suburb of Andheri, on a busy lane across a large cigarette factory, stationed adjacent to a statue of Jesus Christ and what appears to be a rarely-used post box, is a memorial with an unusual message. It informs the reader in Marathi that an Indian scientist, using the ideas enshrined in Vedic texts, was the first person to fly an aircraft. And dangling above this scientist's name is an odd-shaped oval structure, somewhat like a cross between an unusual aquatic species and a badly-illustrated spaceship. This, the memorial informs, is 'marutsakha', or, in Sanskrit, 'friend of the air'-- the world's first aeroplane.

A few blocks away, a 94-year-old man with high-power glasses asks with uncharacteristic zest, "Did you see it? Did you see the memorial?" He is Pratap Velkar, an architect who was involved in the construction of the buildings of the area. He says, "I put the memorial on the street so that people could learn the truth."

In a few days, this message of an Indian trying to build an aircraft in 1895, eight years before the Wright Brothers flew their aircraft, without state patronage or financial help from any businessman, will travel from an old memorial with an odd message to a much wider audience. A Bollywood film on the subject, *Hawaizaada*, releases this week. On its way to the larger screen, a few more outlandish ideas are to be incorporated in the name of creative licence: that the attempted flight was successful, for example, and that the scientist had flown it himself, while according to most accounts, what the Indian scientist supposedly sought to create was an unmanned aircraft.

Much of Shivkar Bapuji Talpade's life and how he went about inventing his flying machine is cloaked in mystery. He is a much-discussed subject on some websites, much of the conversation soaked in faux nationalism and less in research. According to most versions, he invented the aircraft by drawing upon the ideas of aviation outlined in Vedic texts. These versions claim that Talpade held a thrilling demonstration of his aircraft in 1895 on Bombay's Chowpatty beach in front of a large crowd that included well-known names, including the king of nearby Baroda. The aircraft is said to have attained an elevation of nearly 1,500 feet and stayed airborne for several minutes. Some claim Talpade used mercury as a fuel for the aircraft, while others say it was some type of urine. There has been a renewed interest in his story of late.

Apart from the film, a controversial paper on aviation in ancient India at the recently held Indian Science Congress has also detailed Talpade's work.

Talpade is believed to have been born in 1864 in the Pathare Prabhu community in a South Mumbai home. A member of the Arya Samaj, and keenly interested in both Sanskrit and the Vedas, Talpade worked as a technical instructor in the art and craft department of Sir JJ School of Art. It is here, it is said, with an easy access to materials that he built his aircraft.

Vibhu Puri, the director of *Hawaizaada*, claims to have researched the subject of the film for around four years. He tried to find relatives of Talpade and those who might have known about his work, and checked with various libraries and institutes for any written works on Talpade. "I found little, though. And much of what I did find seemed to contradict each other," he says, adding, "But I knew the flight happened. So I went about creating a fictionalised version of it. The film isn't a biopic. But it is based on true events."

The film, however, shows Talpade's character actually flying the aircraft. The plane itself is depicted as a glider with wings, whereas in most versions, the aircraft is supposed to be cylindrical in shape and without wings.

The most detailed work on Talpade has been done by the architect-turned- historian Pratap Velkar in his book *Maharashtracha Ujwal Itihaas*, written around 20 years ago. Velkar, who grew up in Girgaum in South Mumbai, lived two buildings away from where Talpade had lived. "By the time I was growing up, Talpade had been long dead, and the house itself had been sold to a Catholic family. But my father would always point to the house and tell us about how Talpade had gone about creating his aircraft," he says. According to Velkar, his father had also attended the Chowpatty flight demonstration.

"I agree we have very little evidence to say whether Talpade was successful or not in creating a flying machine. But what is interesting is that someone way back then had tried."

While writing the book, Velkar began searching for any of Talpade's living relatives. He was able to contact Talpade's niece, Roshan, and his nephew, Chandrakant Talpade, both of whom have since died. There were no direct surviving relatives of Talpade himself, Velkar found, since Talpade's only son had remained childless. Velkar also came across some essays written by one of Talpade's students, P Satawlekar. From Roshan and Chandrakant, Velkar learnt about how Talpade had gone about building the aircraft, and from Satawlekar's essays he learnt about how most individuals at the time had thought Talpade was being foolish in his pursuit.

Contradicting the versions that claim Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III, the then Maharaja of Baroda, was present at the Chowpatty show, Velkar claims there were very few people gathered that day. "It

wasn't a well-publicised event. It was more like a sporting event. Apart from a few curious onlookers, the only people present were some friends who had showed up to watch him," Velkar says.

According to Velkar, Talpade's marutsakha was a cylindrical structure made of bamboo. The structure was apparently filled with liquid mercury. "When the mercury reacted with sunlight, it released hydrogen. And because hydrogen is lighter than air, it helped the contraption fly," he says. But the plane did not get very high or stay up too long. "It rose to just a small height and crashed within minutes," says Velkar.

As the story goes, Talpade based his work on the Vaimanika Shastra and was guided by a mystic named Subbaraya Shastry, played in the film by Mithun Chakraborty.

The Vaimanika Shastra is said to have been composed by a sage named Bharadwaja thousands of years ago, and transmitted via psychic channelling to Shastry. The work contains some 3,000 shlokas in eight chapters and claims that the 'vimanas' mentioned in the Vedic epics were advanced flying machines.

According to Madhav K Deshpande, a secretary at the Arya Samaj in Pune who recently wrote a book in Marathi on the subject and claims to have found some handwritten notes by Talpade, "The theory of aerodynamics was always present in our Vedas. What Talpade did, with the help of Shastry, was to put that theory into motion."

Academics have however debunked the Vaimanika Shastra. In 1974, scientists of Bangalore's Indian Institute of Science published a study after examining the theories put out in the treatise, and concluded that not only isn't the work ancient (it cannot be dated before 1904), most of the theories put forth are un- feasible. Noting that Talpade built models under the guidance of Shastry but did not succeed in making any of them fly, the researchers write, 'The planes described above are the best poor concoctions, rather than expressions of something real. None of the planes have properties or capabilities of being flown; the geometries are unimaginably horrendous from the point of view of flying; and the principles of propulsion make them resist rather than assist flying.' They also point out how a chapter titled 'Samarangana Sutradhara' stated that a detailed description of their construction and other features could not be disclosed, lest the knowledge be used for evil purposes. 'We are tempted to remark,' the scientists write, 'that he did not know!' They further write, 'What we feel unfortunate in history is that some people tend to eulogise and glorify whatever they can find about our past, even without valid evidence... We feel that the people

connected with publication--directly or indirectly--are solely to blame either for distorting or hiding the history of the manuscripts.'

According to Velkar, after the failure of the show at Chowpatty, Talpade tried to raise funds to build another aircraft. He unsuccessfully asked for funds from the then Maharaja of Baroda and there is even one recorded instance of his appealing to a group of businessmen in Ahmedabad. The damaged aircraft used in the Chowpatty show was meanwhile housed in a warehouse in Mumbai's Malad area. Roshan apparently told Velkar about how the bare chassis of the damaged aircraft gathered dust for several years and the children of the family would sit in it, pretending to fly.

According to some versions, the aircraft was later sold to Rallis Brothers, a Tata company, and, according to some others, to Hindustan Aeronautics in Bangalore. When Velkar tried to find out, he learnt from Roshan and Chandrakant that an Air Force official, Air Vice Marshal (retired) SB Goyal, had taken some parts of the aircraft and the research papers that Talpade had written from the family. When Velkar tried to contact Goyal, he was told the papers had been passed on to a scientific officer in the Union Defence Ministry, GH Bedekar, who had by then retired and was living in Pune. Bedekar refused to share the text with Velkar. "He told me that he had studied the research papers in detail and that they reveal Talpade was unsuccessful," says Velkar.

The story of Talpade's experiments has however come as a boon to conspiracy theorists. Ganesh J Acharya, an advertising professional who some years ago floated an online signature campaign to get Talpade's story incorporated into school syllabus books, claims that the incident is part of a long history of British suppression. "The British tried to ensure Talpade's work did not succeed. They did not want an Indian to build the first aeroplane. After the Chowpatty show, the British tried to make sure that Talpade could not continue with his research," he says. "Unfortunately, many of us still don't know anything about him." According to him, after the film is released, he will start the signature campaign again, so more people can push for Talpade to be incorporated into history text books.

According to Velkar, it is difficult to prove whether the incident occurred at all, since it was back in the 19th century. "I agree we have very little evidence to say whether Talpade was successful or not in creating a flying machine. But what is interesting is that someone way back then had tried."

http://www.huffingtonpost.in/open-magazine/the-myth-of-the-indian-av_b_6638684.html

Courtesy: Huffington Post

This Multibillion-Dollar Corporation Is Controlled by a Penniless Yoga Superstar

Ben Crair

But today he can be found in the most material of places. Turn on an Indian TV, and there's Ramdev, a supple yoga megastar in saffron robes, demonstrating poses on one of the two stations he oversees. Flip the channel, and there's Ramdev in commercials selling shampoo and dish soap. Walk any city on the subcontinent, and there's his face in stores selling the wares of Patanjali Ayurved Ltd., the multibillion-dollar corporation he controls.

Ramdev has said his goal is to sell an ayurvedic item, based on India's ancient medical traditions, for every household need: toothpaste made from cloves, neem, and turmeric; hand soap made from almonds, saffron, and tea tree oil; floor cleaner made from the "natural disinfectant" cow urine. Since 2012, Patanjali's revenue has climbed twentyfold, from \$69 million to \$1.6 billion. It's the fastest-growing company in Indian consumer goods, and Ramdev predicts he will overtake the subsidiaries of multinational giants such as Nestlé SA and Unilever NV as soon as next year. "The 'gate' in Colgate will shut," he once gloated. "Pantene will wet its pants, the lever of Unilever will break down, and the little Nestlé bird will fly away."

It might seem like an impossible arrangement—observing an oath of poverty while also being one of India's top entrepreneurs. But Ramdev is a master of contortion. Patanjali is an omnipresent brand in India, and though everyone refers to it as Ramdev's company, he's not technically its owner or chief executive officer. It would be scandalous for a sanyasi to profit from a corporation, and Ramdev neither owns shares nor takes a salary. He says his net worth is zero. The company calls him merely its "brand ambassador," a title that belies his power.

"If you had to choose the top five living extraordinary Indians, people who have changed the landscape," says Chiki Sarkar, publisher of New Delhi's Juggernaut Books, "Ramdev would make the list." Other modern yogis have large, loyal, and lucrative followings, but Ramdev is the only one to build a sprawling for-profit enterprise in his image. On a three-axis chart of holiness, capitalism, and lumbar flexibility, he occupies a point beyond anyone else on Earth.

Despite his success, Ramdev's life has gone strangely unexamined. No one even knows the year he was born. (He's probably in his early 50s.) "He's so visible, and yet so little understood," said

Priyanka Pathak-Narain, a Mumbai journalist whom Juggernaut hired in 2016 to write his biography. She sees him as “a perfect lens through which you can examine India today,” sitting as he does at “the nexus of business, religion, and politics.” Patanjali’s ayurvedic brand has soared in the climate of Hindu nationalism that lifted India’s ruling party, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, to victory in 2014. Ads for the cow-urine floor cleaner, for example, urge consumers to “save the country from the economic exploitation of foreign companies” and “join the movement to save the cow, our holy mother.”

Ramdev says his worldview is “scientific, secular, and universal”—but he also claims yoga can “cure” homosexuality and has openly fantasized about beheading people who refuse to chant nationalist slogans. He courts attention with publicity stunts, such as televised wrestling matches, while also fighting scrutiny. When he heard last summer that Pathak-Narain’s book, *Godman to Tycoon*, contained unflattering details, he sued and had its distribution blocked in court. (I spoke with the author once, by phone, before a judge issued a gag order.)

Ramdev objected, in particular, to what Pathak-Narain calls three “mysteries” involving the deaths or disappearances of close associates over the course of his career. Ramdev was never named as a suspect in any of the investigations, and he didn’t want to comment when I asked him about the book. “Such people have only one motivation,” he said, “and that is publicity through maligning others.” He offered a much simpler story of his success—a myth more than a biography, which is what you might expect for a person who “is worshiped as a Godman,” as his court filings against Pathak-Narain claim. “This earth, sun, and all of nature are doing their jobs without any expectation,” Ramdev said, burping midway through the sentence. “So I am doing my job.”

When I got to Delhi in the fall, I dropped my bags and set out for a Patanjali shop I’d seen from the airport taxi. I was intercepted, however, by a young man named Kumar Rishi, who had a tattoo of Bob Marley on one biceps and Jack Sparrow on the other. “Baba Ramdev is my hero,” he said when I told him where I was going. He offered to take me to another, better Patanjali shop, and though I knew not to trust touts, I went along and purchased a tube of toothpaste for 40 rupees (60¢). Several hours later (after Rishi took me to a temple, a restaurant, a war memorial, the prime minister’s residence, and, finally, a travel agency, where a likely accomplice tried to bully me into a trip to Kashmir), I was back at my hotel to give it a try.

The label of Patanjali's signature toothpaste, Dant Kanti, lists 13 different herbs. I squeezed some onto my toothbrush and was surprised that it was brown. It was the color of dirt and decay, the very things I wanted to keep out of my mouth. The flavor, however, was pleasing and unlike any toothpaste I'd tasted in the West: spicy with clove, bright with spearmint, and a little bit bitter with neem. I soon got used to the color and found myself happily spitting brown foam into my hotel sink every morning.

As an American reporter, I expected it would be difficult to arrange an interview with Ramdev, given the controversy over the book and the frequent speeches he gives railing against the West. But after just a few emails, his press officer invited me north, to Haridwar, a holy city along the Ganges where Patanjali has its corporate headquarters, as well as an ayurvedic hospital, a yoga school, factories, and a research lab.

Hindus believe Lord Vishnu once left a footprint on a wall in Haridwar, and thousands of pilgrims assemble daily by the water for festivities and prayer. On the riverbanks, I saw dozens of gaunt men in saffron loincloths, with wild hair and windsock beards, seeking alms: sanyasis, like Ramdev. They are figures of great respect and moral authority in Hindu culture, and while many Indians agree sanyasis can't accumulate wealth or property, there's no official set of rules governing their conduct.

Ramdev's home is on the outskirts of the city—in a walled garden he shares with bees, butterflies, and armed security guards. I entered the estate through two huge gates with golden lion-head door knockers, and drove down a brick path toward a complex of tidy white buildings. Ramdev received me in a comfortable parlor, with an ample porch and several couches and armchairs. "Nowhere in our religious books and scriptures is it written that a sanyasi should be a mendicant," he said, referring to the kind of beggars I'd seen along the Ganges.

Ramdev clopped around on strapless wooden sandals called khadau, which must be gripped by knobs between the toes. He wore a tangerine-colored cloth around his waist and another around his shoulders. His black beard mushroomed from his face, and his ponytail was so tight it tugged the corners of his eyes. Our interview began in English, but he soon switched to Hindi and had his spokesman translate. "Yogis in Indian culture have always been guiding society in the right direction and devoting their life for the welfare of society," he said. "And that's why, being a yogi, I also run an enterprise. Because that is my solemn duty to this country."

Ramdev said he runs Patanjali not as a CEO runs a corporation, but rather as a guru runs an ashram. “This is not a corporate house,” he said. “Patanjali is basically a spiritual organization.” It’s a workplace like few others. A Hindu guru is often a figure of absolute authority to his followers, and Patanjali employees treat Ramdev as such. He forbids them to eat meat or drink alcohol. He tells them their labor is a form of *sewa*, or spiritual service, and expects some to accept lower salaries as a result. When he arrived at our interview, his spokesman rushed to touch his feet—a sign of respect for a godman.

This loyalty allows Ramdev to control Patanjali despite his lack of official corporate power. The person most often identified as the company’s CEO—even though his personal website gives his title as “managing director”—is Acharya Balkrishna, a longtime associate and Ramdev disciple. On paper, Balkrishna owns 98.6 percent of the company. According to *Forbes*, he’s the 19th-richest man in India, with a net worth of \$6.1 billion.

Ramdev met Balkrishna around 1990, when they were both students at a traditional religious school in the north of India. Ramdev became a teacher, but, according to an authorized biography, he left his job in remorse after an incident in which he savagely beat a student.

He reunited with his old schoolmate in Haridwar in the early part of the decade. Balkrishna had become close to a yoga teacher called Karamveer Maharaj, who accepted Ramdev as a protégé on two conditions: that he remain celibate and never accept money if he began to give lessons himself. The three men journeyed to the Himalayas, where they meditated in caves. In 1995 they took over the operation of an ashram in Haridwar, and Ramdev made his renunciation. Balkrishna ran the ayurvedic pharmacy, while Ramdev and Karamveer continued to teach yoga.

At the time, yoga was becoming trendy in the West, but in India it was still considered an elite activity. Ramdev and Karamveer offered free workshops that attracted the lower and middle classes. Ramdev learned to wow audiences by standing on his head or deploying his mesmerizing “belly roll.” He’d suck in his breath so his abdominals contracted into a lump of muscle around his navel and then ripple the lump from side to side, as if it were trying to escape from under his skin.

His instruction was bracingly straightforward. He stripped yoga of arcane spirituality: no need to read the sutras or meditate for hours. He simplified the poses so almost anyone could do them safely, and he often said individual poses could be used to treat specific maladies. His yoga was both

a religious pursuit and a tool to master one's health—a powerful message in a country with poor public-health services and crises of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.

In 2002, when a religious TV station announced a new yoga program, Ramdev auditioned to be the host. The producers passed, but Ramdev was determined to get on the air. He bought 20 minutes on a rival channel, drew huge ratings (and enough donations to recoup his costs), and was hired to lead a morning show. His timing was fortuitous: From 2001 to 2017, the number of Indian households with TVs doubled. Many millions of lower- and middle-class Indians, who'd never had the time or money to practice yoga, started to follow Ramdev in their homes. Credited with launching a yoga revival in India, he's sometimes compared by Westerners to Richard Simmons or Jane Fonda. But his impact is more substantive. Stuart Ray Sarbacker, a professor of comparative religion at Oregon State University who's studied Ramdev's career, calls him "the most prominent face of yoga in the entire nation."

Ramdev's yoga was also political—a way to stoke Indian patriotism. "Joining every person with the yoga tradition also has hidden national benefits," he once said. He saw himself as the successor to anticolonial leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, who'd argued that economic self-sufficiency was a vital precursor to independence. "Freedom does not only mean independence from the Britishers," Ramdev said, "but it also means freedom from an unhealthy body."

In speeches and on TV, the yogi blamed India's unhealthy bodies on foreign products, which he called "poison." The nation suffered from "self-confusion," and he promised to restore it to strength through the "traditional sciences practiced by our great hermits." An India where everyone practiced his yoga would be an India without disease or sin. He told his followers that yoga could treat HIV and cancer. He extolled an India redeemed from historical humiliations and returned to power by its own traditions. "The biggest goal is to bring prestige to India and Indian identity within the country and the world," Ramdev said in 2014. "And that journey begins from yoga, from ayurveda." From simple beginnings, the sales pitch would become extraordinarily lucrative.

In the early days of the ashram, Balkrishna and Ramdev biked through fields and forests, collecting ingredients for the pharmacy. Balkrishna would send ayurvedic doctors to Ramdev's yoga camps, where they'd offer free checkups but charge attendees for medicine. As Ramdev's fame grew, so did Balkrishna's revenue. By 2005, Balkrishna was raking in so much money—and handling it so loosely—that Indian authorities raided the pharmacy as part of a tax-evasion investigation. But a local official, Jitender Rana, told Pathak-Narain that he was ordered by his superiors to desist. "Too

many people in power were protecting Ramdev,” the book quotes him as saying. “I came to my senses and left.” (Patanjali declined to comment, and attempts to reach Rana were unsuccessful. The Indian magazine Tehelka offered a similar account to Pathak-Narain’s in 2012.)

Ramdev’s behavior also started to trouble Karamveer, his fellow yoga instructor. “Idealism is easy when you have nothing,” Karamveer told Pathak-Narain. “It’s what you do when you have fame, money, or power that matters.” He left the ashram in 2005. Ramdev had promised he would teach yoga for free, but he began charging people to sit closer to the stage, according to Bhakti Mehta, a TV executive. She traveled with Ramdev to Britain in 2006, where, she said, he required an £11,000 (then \$20,000) donation for a home visit and stood on a cloth that could be rolled up to easily collect the money people threw at his feet. “We saw how power-hungry he really was,” she told Pathak-Narain. (A Patanjali spokesman declined to discuss this or other aspects of the book.)

Around this time, an early business partner, an ayurvedic doctor who’d let Ramdev and Balkrishna run their pharmacy under his license, was murdered. This was Pathak-Narain’s first “mystery,” and while the case remains unsolved, there’s no indication Ramdev or Balkrishna were involved.

The biographer’s second mystery occurred in 2007. The ashram’s figurehead at the time was an elderly guru named Shankar Dev, and on a day that Ramdev was out of the country, he disappeared. Dev left only a note that said, “I have taken some loan from you for this trust but cannot repay it. Please forgive me. I am leaving.” Dev was never seen again. (After seven years, Indian authorities ruled out foul play.)

Discontent was curdling among the pharmacy’s 400 workers. In spring 2005 a quarter of the staff went on strike to demand pay in line with the minimum wage. Ramdev and Balkrishna laid off the strikers, who then alleged that the ashram’s medicines contained unlisted ingredients, including crushed human skulls. A lab test found human DNA.

Ramdev turned his yoga philosophy into a defense. His name was almost synonymous with yoga in India, and he said an attack on him was an attack on tradition. He accused “powerful interests” of tampering with the samples: “It is a conspiracy to stop my experiment to promote a science that is India’s glory.” Politicians rushed to his defense, and the strikers were forced to clarify that their campaign was not against ayurveda or yoga. A retesting of the samples gave Ramdev a clean slate.

Victory seemed to stoke his ambition. He and Balkrishna saw a future for the pharmacy well beyond medicine. He imagined a line of ordinary household products that could help a person “connect with the soul” and “move toward divinity.” The two had always managed the ashram and their businesses through trusts, but in 2006, Ramdev registered Patanjali as a corporation.

As the company began to develop commercial products, Ramdev’s fervor took a brief, meteoric, and disastrous detour into politics. The ruling party, the Indian National Congress, was beset by scandal, and voters were looking for change. Ramdev, with a huge public profile, was the kind of outsider who could shake up the system. In 2010 he launched his own party and said he would field candidates in every district nationwide in the next election. “We must have a total revolution!” he declared.

Ramdev accused foreign companies and wealthy individuals of robbing India of its wealth, and he demanded extreme solutions, such as the death penalty for corruption. His closest political ally was an activist named Rajiv Dixit. As more Indian voters warmed to their message, however, Dixit’s star threatened to eclipse Ramdev’s own. On Nov. 30, 2010, at age 43, Dixit dropped dead from a heart attack. (This is the third mystery in Pathak-Narain’s book.) Dixit’s death was never investigated by police, but rumors of wrongdoing quickly attached to Ramdev. He eventually denounced them, and at the time, they didn’t slow his rise.

On June 4, 2011, channeling Gandhi, Ramdev began a hunger strike in Delhi to protest corruption. Forty thousand people showed up, spooking the government, which ordered police to raid the gathering. In the melee, one person died, and Ramdev tried to escape by disguising himself in women’s clothes.

Images of Ramdev in his getup—his beard as bushy as ever—spread widely, to much snickering. Many voters found it hard to imagine him as the nation’s leader, and his movement fizzled. He returned his attention to Patanjali, whose line was expanding beyond medicine and beauty into juices, grains, and spices. He hired a food-processing veteran named S.K. Patra to be the president of Patanjali’s comestible operations and the CEO of Patanjali Ayurved. “Baba Ramdev simply embraced me and asked when I can join,” Patra says of their first meeting. “He said that God has sent me to Patanjali to serve humanity.”

Patra began emulating the multinational corporations that Ramdev so despised. He hired foreign consultants to unknot the dozens of enterprises and organizations that fell under the Patanjali umbrella. He standardized plant procedures, created committees to oversee fundamental tasks such as quality control, and overhauled Patanjali's distribution network.

From 2011 to 2014 the company's revenue quadrupled, to \$188 million, and the number of products grew from 50 to 500, including ghee and honey. Ramdev insisted the company pump profits back into the business to lower prices and create new products. "Baba was very sharp, with robust common sense and business acumen," Patra says. (It's grudging praise. Patra, who left the company in 2014, also says Ramdev paid him only half what he was owed.) When Nestlé had to recall its popular Maggi Instant Noodles in 2015 over lead concerns, for example, Ramdev quickly unveiled Patanjali Instant Noodles.

It was a shrewd move for a businessman, but questionable for a yogi claiming to look after people's health. Ramdev said his noodles were healthy, but India's Food Safety and Drugs Administration found they had an ash content triple the legal limit. Customers didn't much care. "Whatever he produces, nobody thought that it is shit," Patra says. "They thought it is a god-given product."

"We have had no quality cases or quality problems," Ramdev told me. But Patanjali products have been dogged by such concerns. In April, the Indian Armed Forces stopped selling a popular Patanjali juice to soldiers after it failed lab tests. The next month, the Hindustan Times reported that a Patanjali health product, shivlingi seeds, had also failed tests. In June, Nepal forced the recall of six products over microbial concerns.

In our conversation, Ramdev dismissed these reports as the work of "Western interests." He also waved off negative stories about working conditions at Patanjali. "We have never broken any law, and we have never done any wrong to anyone, and violence is out of the question," he said. It was a "conspiracy" to defame him, he said, when police issued a warrant in 2013 for the arrest of his brother Ram Bharat, whom the Economic Times has called Patanjali's "informal CEO," over the alleged kidnapping and imprisonment of a watchman suspected of theft.

The case against Bharat was dropped after witnesses recanted. But he ran into trouble with the law again in May 2015, when Patanjali security forces brawled with truck drivers at the company's food-processing complex, leaving one trucker dead. After video emerged of Bharat appearing to encourage the guards, he was arrested and held in jail for 14 days, though he was never charged.

The controversies haven't harmed sales. Revenue surpassed \$1 billion for the first time in the company's 2017 fiscal year. Other gurus moved to copy Patanjali's success and start their own product lines; the New York Times named the trend India's "Baba cool" movement and called Ramdev its "king."

The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry, an Indian trade organization, has called Patanjali "the most disruptive force in the fast-moving consumer goods market." In 2016, Credit Suisse Group downgraded its rating for Colgate-Palmolive (India) Ltd. based solely on the success of Patanjali's Dant Kanti. A few months later, Colgate started selling its own herbal toothpaste. Hindustan-Unilever Ltd. hired local doctors the same year to revamp its ayurvedic brand, Ayush, with products such as turmeric anti-pimple wash.

Ramdev has floated plans for business lines in clothing, private security, animal feed, solar power, and restaurants. He also wants to export Patanjali products to the U.S., U.K., and around the globe. While he no longer speaks of directly entering politics, he enjoys greater influence in India than ever.

After his hunger strike destroyed his relationship with the incumbent government, he found an ally in the ascendant BJP. In 2014 he campaigned alongside the party's conservative politicians. (At one rally, he was caught on camera rebuking a candidate who'd asked him about fundraising. "Are you a fool for asking and talking about money when cameras are on?" he asked, seething.) After the BJP won, and Narendra Modi became prime minister, Ramdev claimed to have "prepared the ground for the big political changes that occurred."

Modi realized yoga and ayurveda could be valuable in stoking religious and nationalist sentiment. He elevated the government department promoting yoga and ayurveda (and which regulates Patanjali products) to a cabinet ministry; lobbied the United Nations to start an International Yoga Day; and exempted yoga-focused charitable trusts from some taxes.

Ramdev has called Modi a "close friend" but maintains that Patanjali hasn't benefited from the friendship. "We do not take or want any favors from the government," he told me. But a 2017 report by Reuters found that since Modi came to power, Patanjali has received more than \$46 million in discounts on land deals in states governed by the BJP. The company has acquired almost 2,000 acres, which it says it will use to build new factories and cultivate herbs. The state of Haryana also offered Ramdev "all perks of a cabinet minister, including cars, bungalows, staff and security

from the state,” a government spokesperson told the local Telegraph newspaper, but Ramdev said that, as a sanyasi, he had to decline.

Last year, Modi presided over the opening of the Patanjali Research Institute in Haridwar. The jewel of its corporate empire, the facility is described as a place for ayurvedic medicines to be researched and tested with the same rigor as pharmaceuticals in the West. “Swami Ramdev’s herbs help you overcome all problems,” Modi told the crowd, as Ramdev smiled beside him in his saffron. The prime minister then directly addressed Ramdev: “I have greater faith in the power of your blessings, and those of the people, than I have in myself.” The material world went unmentioned.

The sanyasi had reached a higher plane.

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/162e35184921ab1f>

Why the 'Right to Believe' Is Not a Right to Believe Whatever You Want

Daniel DeNicola

Do we have the right to believe whatever we want to believe? This supposed right is often claimed as the last resort of the willfully ignorant, the person who is cornered by evidence and mounting opinion: ‘I believe climate change is a hoax whatever anyone else says, and I have a right to believe it!’ But *is* there such a right?

We do recognise the right to *know* certain things. I have a right to know the conditions of my employment, the physician’s diagnosis of my ailments, the grades I achieved at school, the name of my accuser and the nature of the charges, and so on. But belief is not knowledge.

Beliefs are factive: to believe is to take to be true. It would be absurd, as the analytic philosopher G.E. Moore observed in the 1940s, to say: ‘It is raining, but I don’t believe that it is raining.’ Beliefs aspire to truth – but they do not entail it. Beliefs can be false, unwarranted by evidence or reasoned consideration. They can also be morally repugnant. Among likely candidates: beliefs that are sexist, racist or homophobic; the belief that proper upbringing of a child requires ‘breaking the will’ and severe corporal punishment; the belief that the elderly should routinely be

euthanised; the belief that ‘ethnic cleansing’ is a political solution, and so on. If we find these morally wrong, we condemn not only the potential acts that spring from such beliefs, but the content of the belief itself, the act of believing it, and thus the believer.

Such judgments can imply that believing is a voluntary act. But beliefs are often more like states of mind or attitudes than decisive actions. Some beliefs, such as personal values, are not deliberately chosen; they are ‘inherited’ from parents and ‘acquired’ from peers, acquired inadvertently, inculcated by institutions and authorities, or assumed from hearsay. For this reason, I think, it is not always the coming-to-hold-this-belief that is problematic; it is rather the sustaining of such beliefs, the refusal to disbelieve or discard them that can be voluntary and ethically wrong.

If the content of a belief is judged morally wrong, it is also thought to be false. The belief that one race is less than fully human is not only a morally repugnant, racist tenet; it is also thought to be a false claim – though not by the believer. The falsity of a belief is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a belief to be morally wrong; neither is the ugliness of the content sufficient for a belief to be morally wrong. Alas, there are indeed morally repugnant truths, but it is not the believing that makes them so. Their moral ugliness is embedded in the world, not in one’s belief about the world.

‘Who are you to tell me what to believe?’ replies the zealot. It is a misguided challenge: it implies that certifying one’s beliefs is a matter of someone’s authority. It ignores the role of reality. Believing has what philosophers call a ‘mind-to-world direction of fit’. Our beliefs are intended to reflect the real world – and it is on this point that beliefs can go haywire. There are irresponsible beliefs; more precisely, there are beliefs that are acquired and retained in an irresponsible way. One might disregard evidence; accept gossip, rumour, or testimony from dubious sources; ignore incoherence with one’s other beliefs; embrace wishful thinking; or display a predilection for conspiracy theories.

I do not mean to revert to the stern evidentialism of the 19th-century mathematical philosopher William K Clifford, who claimed: ‘It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.’ Clifford was trying to prevent irresponsible ‘overbelief’, in which wishful thinking, blind faith or sentiment (rather than evidence) stimulate or justify belief. This is too restrictive. In any complex society, one has to rely on the testimony of reliable sources, expert judgment and the best available evidence. Moreover, as the psychologist William James responded in 1896, some of our most important beliefs about the world and the human prospect

must be formed without the possibility of sufficient evidence. In such circumstances (which are sometimes defined narrowly, sometimes more broadly in James's writings), one's 'will to believe' entitles us to choose to believe the alternative that projects a better life.

In exploring the varieties of religious experience, James would remind us that the 'right to believe' can establish a climate of religious tolerance. Those religions that define themselves by required beliefs (creeds) have engaged in repression, torture and countless wars against non-believers that can cease only with recognition of a mutual 'right to believe'. Yet, even in this context, extremely intolerant beliefs cannot be tolerated. Rights have limits and carry responsibilities.

Unfortunately, many people today seem to take great licence with the right to believe, flouting their responsibility. The wilful ignorance and false knowledge that are commonly defended by the assertion 'I have a right to my belief' do not meet James's requirements. Consider those who believe that the lunar landings or the Sandy Hook school shooting were unreal, government-created dramas; that Barack Obama is Muslim; that the Earth is flat; or that climate change is a hoax. In such cases, the right to believe is proclaimed as a negative right; that is, its intent is to foreclose dialogue, to deflect all challenges; to enjoin others from interfering with one's belief-commitment. The mind is closed, not open for learning. They might be 'true believers', but they are not believers in the truth.

Believing, like willing, seems fundamental to autonomy, the ultimate ground of one's freedom. But, as Clifford also remarked: 'No one man's belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone.' Beliefs shape attitudes and motives, guide choices and actions. Believing and knowing are formed within an epistemic community, which also bears their effects. There is an ethic of believing, of acquiring, sustaining, and relinquishing beliefs – and that ethic both generates and limits our right to believe. If some beliefs are false, or morally repugnant, or irresponsible, some beliefs are also dangerous. And to those, we have no right.

<https://thewire.in/media/is-the-right-to-believe-a-right-to-believe-whatever-you-want>

Courtesy: The Wire

Why Do Smart People Do Foolish Things?

Heather A. Butler

Intelligence is not the same as critical thinking and the difference matters

- We all probably know someone who is intelligent, but does surprisingly stupid things. My family delights in pointing out times when I (a professor) make really dumb mistakes. What does it mean to be *smart* or *intelligent*? Our everyday use of the term is meant to describe someone who is knowledgeable and makes wise decisions, but this definition is at odds with how intelligence is traditionally measured. The most widely known measure of intelligence is the *intelligence quotient*, more commonly known as the IQ test, which includes visuospatial puzzles, math problems, pattern recognition, vocabulary questions, and visual searches.
- The advantages of being intelligent are undeniable. Intelligent people are more likely to get better grades and go farther in school. They are more likely to be successful at work. And they are less likely to get into trouble (e.g., commit crimes) as adolescents. Given all the advantages of intelligence, though, you may be surprised to learn that it does not predict other life outcomes, such as well-being. You might imagine that doing well in school or at work might lead to greater life satisfaction, but several large scale studies have failed to find evidence that IQ impacts life satisfaction or longevity. Grossman and his colleagues argue that most intelligence tests fail to capture real-world decision-making and our ability to interact well with others. This is, in other words, perhaps why “smart” people, do “dumb” things.
- The ability to think critically, on the other hand, *has* been associated with wellness and longevity. Though often confused with intelligence, critical thinking is not intelligence. Critical thinking is a collection of cognitive skills that allow us to think rationally in a goal-orientated fashion, and a disposition to use those skills when appropriate. Critical thinkers are amiable skeptics. They are flexible thinkers who require evidence to support their beliefs and recognize fallacious attempts to persuade them. Critical thinking means overcoming all sorts of cognitive biases (e.g., hindsight bias, confirmation bias, etc.).

- Critical thinking predicts a wide range of life events. In a series of studies, conducted in the United States and abroad, my colleagues and I have found that critical thinkers experience fewer bad things in life. We asked people to complete an inventory of life events and take a critical thinking assessment (the Halpern Critical Thinking Assessment). The critical thinking assessment measures 5 components of critical thinking skills including verbal reasoning, argument analysis, hypothesis testing, probability and uncertainty, decision-making, and problem-solving. The inventory of negative life events captures different domains of life such as academic (e.g., I forgot about an exam), health (e.g., I contracted a sexually transmitted infection because I did not wear a condom), legal (e.g., I was arrested for driving under the influence), interpersonal (e.g., I cheated on my romantic partner who I had been with for over a year), financial (e.g., I have over \$5000 of credit card debt), etc. Repeatedly, we found that critical thinkers experience fewer negative life events. This is an important finding because there is plenty of evidence that critical thinking can be taught and improved.
- Is it better to be a critical thinker or to be intelligent? My latest research pitted critical thinking and intelligence against each other to see which was associated with fewer negative life events. People who were strong on either intelligence or critical thinking experienced fewer negative events, but critical thinkers did better.
- Intelligence and improving intelligence are hot topics that receive a lot of attention. It is time for critical thinking to receive a little more of that attention. Keith Stanovich wrote an entire book about *What Intelligence Tests Miss*. Reasoning and rationality more closely resemble what we mean when we say a person is *smart* than spatial skills and math ability. Furthermore, improving intelligence is difficult. Intelligence is largely determined by genetics. Critical thinking, though, can improve with training and the benefits have been shown to persist over time. Anyone can improve their critical thinking skills: Doing so, we can say with certainty, is a smart thing to do.

https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-do-smart-people-do-foolish-things/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=weekly-review&utm_content=link&utm_term=2017-10-04_more-stories

'Good bye' to our Saints

Sharad Bedekar

India is a considerably large nation with a huge population of over a billion people spread into a number of provinces, speaking numerous languages, belonging to different religions and yet an important secular nation in the world. It is necessary therefore that we ought to solve our problems of the day with the help of science of the day coupled with human virtues (that sustain a civilized society.) Searching their solutions in the thoughts of our kind and caring saints of the past is futile

No doubt we owe a lot to these saints for they were the ones who led the movement of enlightening the downtrodden masses that was essential at that time. This they did most effectively. The Bhakti movement that they propagated to achieve this purpose is popular even today among the masses. However to my mind we have failed to discern wherein does their greatness lay. We are told that they were great because god revealed himself to them and miracles happened around them; God used to converse with Namdev and other saints like him; a special plane was sent for Tukaram to ascend to heaven in his material body, a feat impossible to any other mortal, etc. But today in the 21st century- the age of Science, we should be wise enough not to believe that such miraculous incidents did occur. It is also not true that these saints relinquished their entire worldly affairs and denied the flesh; or even that they taught people merely how to ensure a happy existence in the other world after death. In fact they were quite dedicated and tried to educate people to be happy, satisfied and moral in this world. So denying the miracles attributed to them or emphasizing their involvement in 'this worldly affairs' does not belittle their greatness in any way. Because their greatness emanates mainly from their incessant struggle against the wrong religious tenets and evil customs and traditions in a very hostile circumstance, bearing the brunt of their adversaries' wrath; and we choose to ignore this very aspect of their strong character.

The saints, believers of devotional way, denied all orthodox rituals as useless and emphasized simple honest conduct and pure mind. They refused to succumb to any customs, rituals, including observances, pilgrimages, etc. And as the necessary psychological support that people need, they offered a simple god, easier to attain through devotion. One should admit that this was necessary and appropriate to those days. The saints condemned all pretence of religiosity and thwarted the deterioration of (due to the wrong ways of the Tantriks) in the name of worship. Similarly they exposed the futility of irascible ways of worship and customs. They preached that instead of burning valuable eatable items in the Yagnyas one should burn out one's own anger and excessive desire and purify one's mind. They also urged people not to show off their riches to help each other and adopt the correct path together. They gave very important messages like futility of vows to people,

such as; if one can beget children by vows, one need not marry and have a husband; make your mind clear and pellucid and you will accomplish everything that you want. In short all saints were involved in the work of eradicating superstitions that prevailed in their own times.

They also declared that the higher class people's learning the Vedas by heart without understanding their meaning is useless. They refused to accept the undue importance of Sanskrit as 'the language of the gods' and brought the dialects of various languages used by the masses to prominence. This rebellion of theirs was not just restricted to language but it touched the life of the people. This served two purposes. 1. They could condemn the perverse rituals adopted by the masses out of their belief in mean deities, and 2. They could show people deprived of the education that the higher classes could get, the way to emancipate themselves. Thus these rebellious saints have obliged us by exposing the self styled religious hypocrites and also emancipating the masses.

Yet the saints could not demolish the caste system or the insurmountable walls between castes, or the evil custom of untouchability, or the unjust discrimination against women. Because although they were courageous rebels, yet they were only human beings, constrained by the limits of time and place and the then prevailing circumstances. It is quite possible that they were simply not able to reject the discriminating but fundamental concepts like-Atma, rebirth, Karmavipak (accumulated fruit of deeds of previous births), etc. and introduce the new ideas of equality. That is why they were unable to eradicate the discriminating caste system.

1. From today's vantage point in our completely changed life style, we can detect quite a few defects in the thinking of our saints.
2. As already stated the saints denied all caste discriminations and untouchability in their spiritual thoughts; and yet they did not try in any way to bring equality among the castes or bring the ugly system of untouchability to an end.
3. Similarly they did not try to put their liberal views regarding women's education and inferior status into practice. Our society opposed women's education till the beginning of 20th century.
4. In their religious framework, the saints retained all the unreasonable concepts of demigods and goddesses, daemons, heaven and hell, the theory of sins and their sure products in after births, rebirth, Atma, the almighty god, final emancipation, etc. and regarded them as essential for our life in this world.
5. Although the saints rejected worshiping or appeasing ghosts-devils-spirits etc., they did not refute their very existence and let superstitions regarding them prevail.

6. They preached 'know thy self', easy way of emancipation etc., but never talked about the foreign aggressors at our doorstep.
7. Some of the saints' literature contains despicable descriptions of human body, family life, sex, pregnancy, etc. We surely cannot accept these thoughts today.
8. They taught the masses the need of emancipation of self. But the only way to achieve this was according to them worshiping god. If we remove worshiping god, Moksha, relief from the cycle of death and rebirths, and all such illogical concepts nothing commendable remains in their thoughts.

Finally our main objection to the teaching of the saints is that they made us Indians utterly faithful and thereby hindered our ability to think independently. They now firmly believed that visiting the temples, repeating god's name constantly, singing god's praises and spending life in his worship is what a human being should aim at. We spend days and months in these useless and meaningless tasks. It seems we have embraced faith and thrown reason to wind.

We are now in the 21st century when the situation is completely changed. World population has crossed the 7 billion mark. Out of those 7billions over one billion people are crowded on an inadequate piece of land. Half of them live in the big cities and towns, in a much polluted atmosphere, eat and drink unhygienic food and water, gulp medicine pills and somehow manage to carry on their life in congested areas. Natural balance is no more maintained as forests, water, vegetation, species of animals and birds are disappearing from the face of the earth. We are already putting an unbearable pressure on the earth and yet foolishly advocate that each woman should give birth to at least four children. Instead of doing anything on our own, we expect god to reincarnate himself and save us from the impending calamity.

Are Reason and Religion Mutually Exclusive?

Ruth Jackson

Contemporary Western liberals often assume that theological and political worldviews are competing discourses. Religion, when it enters the political arena, is cast as just another ideology vying for power. But treating the theological and the political as warring forces stops us from looking at the more surprising ways that they interact and inform each other.

Friedrich Schleiermacher was a churchman and civil servant in early 19th-century Germany who rejected a neat partition between the spiritual and the political. In his writing and his life, he grappled, not always successfully, with how to reconcile the two. But in doing so, he offers up some worthwhile lessons about how reason and feeling can coexist in the public sphere, and provides us with a rich picture of what makes life meaningful.

Schleiermacher's context is key to understanding his thought. He rose to prominence as a man of letters during the upheavals of the Napoleonic Wars, and his interest in the cultural and moral formation (*Bildung*) of German citizens led him to cultivate a striking array of institutional roles and affiliations. As a scholar, Schleiermacher did field-changing work in theology, ethics and hermeneutics. He had a reputation for being a religious liberal, and early in his career was even accused of pantheism. But he was also a passionate theological educator, dedicated to his ministry in the Reformed Protestant church.

By his late 20s, Schleiermacher was a celebrated member of Berlin's salon culture. Alongside his friend, Friedrich Schlegel, Schleiermacher became a central voice in what we now call early German Romanticism. This movement arose partly in response to the Enlightenment, and privileged the place of intuition, passion and the transcendence of the human spirit. Yet Schleiermacher also belongs to the Enlightenment project, advocating for the critical power of reason, defending personal liberty, and pushing for institutional reform. In a sense he was also a pioneer of German nationalism, one of a handful of influential thinkers who saw a German nation-state as a potential solution to the problems of the Napoleonic era.

It's worth mentioning that 19th-century German nationalism was very different to the dark phenomenon it became in the mid-20th century. In no sense was it a mass political movement – it was a minority view, even among the educated elite, and many of those were concerned only with a cultural and social concept of the nation. Even those thinkers that called for a unified German state

did so, in part, because they saw the political fragmentation of German lands as an obstacle to resisting the imperialism of Napoleon and to achieving enlightened, liberal government. Schleiermacher was a professor at the University of Halle when Napoleon's troops invaded and occupied the town in October 1806, and spoke urgently about the need to defend a united Germany. But the source of this unity was rooted in a common German feeling, as well as shared moral and spiritual development, not in any ethnic or cultural essentialism. He also defended the right to free speech, and argued that individual liberty and free participation in civic society should be a central concern of such nation-building.

For Schleiermacher, the religious and the political realms did not simply compete over the same terrain. Rather, he saw them as distinctive yet constituent parts of the bigger whole of an individual life. He was profoundly influenced by Plato in his belief that reason is what orders our desires and instincts – enabling people to govern well, to take their place in a moral and civilised society, and to be properly responsible for their environment.

But religion was still the 'highest' and most essential of these two parts, Schleiermacher said in *On Religion* (1799). Unlike politics, religion is a matter of feeling (Gefühl) and intuition; it doesn't amount simply to praxis or speculation, but is instead the 'sensibility and taste for the Infinite'. It was a 'universal' aspect of being human, something for which we have the capacity, according to our very nature.

This vision of religion as the 'highest' part of humanity was a new iteration of a very ancient idea: the notion that politics alone cannot bring about human flourishing, and that political categories can't completely capture or describe the full extent of a person. Politics isn't cancelled out or overthrown by 'religion'. Instead, for Schleiermacher, the business of governing well is a means to a higher purpose.

While he saw rationality as affording dignity and freedom to human beings, Schleiermacher the Romantic also stressed how people are bound to the world in other, less predictable ways. We are creatures among other creatures, mere tiny parts of nature's great organism. All of our thoughts, he argued, are conditioned by our circumstances: the language we speak, where we're from, the community roles we have. Born into surroundings that existed before us and will outlast us, it was clear to Schleiermacher that existence, reality and truth are not created by human beings themselves. Our existence is instead given to us, he maintained, from a transcendent, eternal and infinite source.

According to Schleiermacher, then, to be religious is to recognise that human beings are not the ultimate authors of their own existence, and that they are not the arbiters or producers of value in what they see around them. Meaning is not grounded in human reason. It was in this light that Schleiermacher understood piety as an abiding ‘feeling’ that accompanies all human thinking, imagining, dwelling and doing. Piety for him meant coming to terms with the precarious and miraculous nature of our experience, being conscious of ourselves as creatures who are ‘absolutely dependent’.

But just as politics has its limits, so too does religion. It can’t displace or do the work of politics in our world; the work of the church belongs instead to the domain of the spirit. This is why Schleiermacher didn’t believe in theocracy or religious states. On the contrary, he argued for the separation of church and state, on the grounds that this would promote the success of both. In *On Religion*, we find Schleiermacher pushing this argument to its limit, when he proposes that religion really belongs to the institution of the family. And vice versa, as part of his national vision, he contended that the education of children in Germany (traditionally falling to the church) should be taken on by the state instead. He also argued that full legal privileges should not be withheld or bestowed for religious reasons, an unusual view at the time.

However, Schleiermacher didn’t always pull off this delicate balancing act between political and religious freedoms. We can see this in his response to the situation of Germany’s Jews. Only a small minority of German states granted Jews official civil and political rights in Schleiermacher’s lifetime, and to his credit he was a vocal critic of this situation. In 1799, as part of a public discussion about legal equality between Christians and Jews in Berlin, he fought against the specific proposal that baptism and conversion to Protestant Christianity should be required for Jews seeking German citizenship and political emancipation. Civil rights were there to establish equality between persons regardless of religion, he said, and to ensure their safety and freedom.

But in reality, Schleiermacher’s understanding of ‘religion’ was distinctively Christian, even though he claimed the concept had universal application. No, legal rights shouldn’t depend on confessional affiliations; but Schleiermacher still contended that a commitment to Jewish ceremonial law and the hope for a messiah were incompatible with a true acknowledgement of Germany as one’s fatherland – and, by extension, a wholehearted participation in German culture. Here Schleiermacher was influenced by the Christian idea that the Kingdom of God can never be fully realised in the temporal world. The upshot was that his attempt to defend the civil liberties of the Jews ended up in a disturbing failure to fully uphold their religious freedoms.

Schleiermacher ultimately fell short in his effort to navigate politics and religion as complementary rather than competing spheres. Nevertheless, his principles provide a valuable source for reflection in our own day. Faced with the question ‘How do we live together?’, Schleiermacher understood that bonds between individuals cannot be truly established or exhaustively described by political power alone.

<https://thewire.in/173140/are-reason-and-religion-mutually-exclusive/>

Courtesy: The Wire

She didn't see it coming: psychic arrested for \$800,000 fraud

Arwa Mahdawi

Psychic Zoe has not had a very good week. On 9 May the fortune-teller, whose real name is Ann Thompson, was arrested by the New York Police Department on suspicion of defrauding clients out of over \$800,000. You’d think she might have had a premonition the police would be knocking at her door but, alas, the future isn’t always crystal clear.

The police were notified of Thompson after two of her victims contacted private investigator Bob Nygaard, who specializes in psychic scams (you can read about his work [in a feature](#) we published in 2016).

Both victims would like their names to remain anonymous, however one is a mother in her late 40s from Canada who was defrauded of at least \$740,000. The second victim is a professional man in his 30s from the midwest who met Thompson while on business in Manhattan last year, and who was scammed out of \$72,000.

But what exactly is a “psychic scam”, you might ask? Surely any trip to a psychic involves a large leap of faith and no guarantees? That’s certainly true; it is difficult to take a fortune-teller to court because the tall, dark, handsome stranger you were told was definitely in your future never materialized. You can, however, charge a psychic for grand theft or larceny when they’ve taken a large fortune from someone via deception or false promises.

Thompson, sensing a broken heart and a naive nature, quickly took advantage of the woman’s distress and drained her life savings. She convinced the Canadian that she’d never find love again unless she bought the psychic a 9.2 carat diamond ring.

She also convinced the victim to spend large sums of money on spells that would vanquish demons, as well as on building a “golden pyramid” that would protect her and her loved ones from dying. Needless to say, the golden pyramid was entirely fictitious.

While Thompson is currently awaiting sentencing, Nygaard has already helped put a number of fraudulent fortune-tellers behind bars. By his count, he has helped successfully prosecute 30 psychics and recovered more than \$3.5m for his clients to date.

Despite his track record, Nygaard still finds it difficult to get law enforcement to take clairvoyant chicanery seriously. While he says he “received excellent cooperation from a NYPD detective, in regard to this particular case”, all too often the police tend to treat psychic fraud like a joke.

However, Nygaard stresses, psychics conning desperate people out of large amounts of money is a serious problem. “The prevalence with which these psychic scams are occurring, and the exorbitant amounts of money of which vulnerable people are being defrauded, not only in NYC but all over the USA, is absolutely astonishing,” Nygaard told the Guardian. “Police and prosecutors need to wake up [and] realize that these self-proclaimed psychics are often part of organized criminal enterprises.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/may/12/new-york-psychic-arrested-zoe-fortune-teller>

Courtesy: Guardian

LETTER BOX

Dear respected Narlikar Saheb,

This is with reference to your article Science should have the last word appeared in The Hindu of 17 Feb 2018.

I wish to draw Your attention to your letter to me dated .2 Nov 2006 " Thanks for your letter .I always wonder why the defenders of our heritage claim that our ancestors knew all that western science-- discoveries only after the discovery is made in modern science If they can predict future discoveries from the past records they will command some credibility ." (Sd. Jayant Narlikar 2 Nov 2006 Ref: JVN /PC /2006 /7690.)

I may not repeat my long letter here but only would like to refer to the column in " Science and Religion " by George Johnson in the Hindu Dt. 22 Nov 2006 in which Prof. Weinberg

wrote "Anything that we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done and may in the end be our greatest contribution to civilization. " Then you had sighed with anguish "Are we living in 21st century or 18th?" That was with reference to the Hindu -- obsession to Astrology.

Now the situation is really frightening. The article 51[h] of the constitution is craftily made null and void by the 'Purohitshahi' and their political patrons. The word "Hindutwa "has infected the brains of a large segment of Hindus. The Saffron virus has infected their Grey--cells and turned them into Saffron.

The only salvation as Prof Weinberg wished a decade ago is to mobilize a large group of Scientists, rationalist circles, progressive thinkers & journalists and release a document to explain how science raises the level of consciousness of whole society and how religious obscurantism makes the society stagnant specially targeting the youth.

In recent days Authors like Wendy Doniger who exposed the ugly facts of Hindu--History are hated by a few Hindu Evangelists like Rajeev Malhotra, Subrahmanya Swamy and some ABVP youth leaders and a few Brahminic Demagogues are manipulating Mythology into a literary entertainment and masquerade mythology as History.

Keshav Shet Revankar

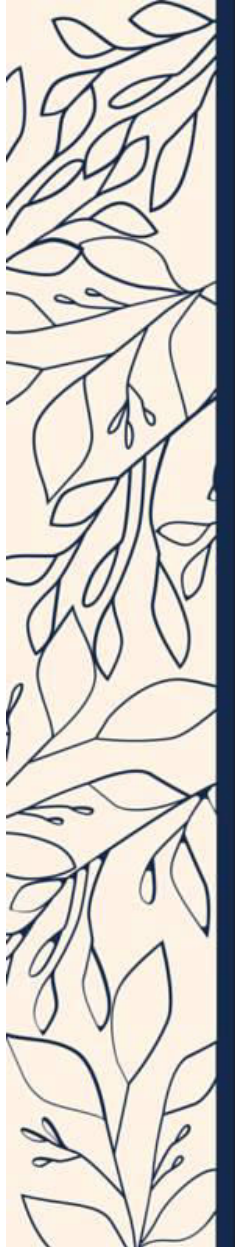
Email: keshavashet@yahoo.com

"Rise from your knees; cease your mindless murmurs to a god who does not exist or, at best, does not care; and accept the world as it actually is. There is learning to do, there are discoveries to be made and there is knowledge to win. The blackness has not yet fully lifted, but we can only strive for greater illumination when we clutch science as, as Carl Sagan might have said, our candle in the dark."

--Dan Ferrisi

Why You Should Study?

Kamla Bhasin



A father asks his daughter:
Study? Why should you study?
I have sons aplenty who can study.
Girl, why should you study?

For my dreams to take flight, I must study
Knowledge brings new light, so I must study
For the battles I must fight, I must study
Because I am a girl, I must study.

To fight men's violence, I must study
To end my silence, I must study
To challenge patriarchy I must study
To demolish all hierarchy, I must study.
Because I am a girl, I must study.

To mould a faith I can trust, I must study
To make laws that are just, I must study
To sweep centuries of dust, I must study
To challenge what I must, I must study
Because I am a girl, I must study.

To know right from wrong, I must study.
To find a voice that is strong, I must study
To write feminist songs I must study
To make a world where girls belong, I must study.
Because I am a girl, I must study.

----Kamla Bhasin



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THOUGHT & ACTION

Committed to Build Rationalist Society

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After Several Arrests, Questions Still Surround the Dabholkar Murder Investigation

Alka Dhupkar

Despite the arrest of one more person last week in connection with the August 20, 2013 killing of rationalist Narendra Dabholkar, questions remain about the manner in which the case is being handled by the Central Bureau of Investigation.

On August 18, the CBI arrested Sachin Andhure of Aurangabad and identified him as one of Dabholkar's shooters. The arrest came soon after the Maharashtra police's anti-terrorism squad (ATS) arrested three men, including Vaibhav Raut, and seized a vast quantity of explosives from them in Nallasopara outside Mumbai on August 10. One of the three shared information about Andure's participation in Dabholkar's murder, following which the CBI, which is the agency investigating the case, made the arrest.

The CBI has also claimed that Andure was working closely with Dr Virendra Tawde, who is already in custody, to plan the murder. According to the agency, Tawde, an ENT specialist and a member of the Sanathan Sanstha, is the 'kingpin' behind the shooting of the 68-year-old rationalist while he was out for his morning walk. Tawde was arrested in 2016.

However, despite the arrests, many questions remain about the crime and the investigation.

The CBI had earlier said that Vinay Pawar and Sarang Akolkar, both still absconding, were the shooters – but now Andure has been named.

Former Maharashtra chief minister Prithviraj Chavan has publicly said that the 'real masterminds of the killing and three prominent persons' are being protected. He has also questioned the timing of the arrests, which coincide with the fifth anniversary of the murder.

The CBI chargesheet in Dabholkar murder case mentions at point number 36:

"The investigation has established through oral and documentary evidence that Dr Virendrasinh Tawde who harbored enmity / hatred with Dr Dabholkar owing to the ideological differences between Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (Dr Dabholkar's organization) and Sanatan Santha, criminally conspired with Vinay Pawar and Sarang Akolkar and others to murder Dr Dabholkar and in pursuance of the criminal conspiracy, Vinay Pawar and Sarang Akolkar shot dead Dr Dabholkar on 20th August 2013 at about 7.25am at Omkakreshwar Bridge, Pune.."

Six eyewitnesses had identified sketches and pictures of Akolkar and Pawar. Now, the CBI will have to build up a new case against Andure. The investigating agency will have to get eyewitnesses for Andure, while filing a supplementary or a fresh a chargesheet which will have to be in accordance with the earlier chargesheet. The question is, will the CBI discard the first charge sheet?

In March 2017, the CBI had announced a Rs 5 lakh award for leads on Akolkar and Pawar, as Dabholkar's shooters. The agency has yet not withdrawn that award.

On August 19, the CBI lawyer made a surprising claim in a Pune courtroom, saying that the shooters' names were never mentioned in the chargesheet and just the resemblance of the sketches with pictures of Akolkar and Pawar was noted.

This contradicts the chargesheet, which clearly mentions Pawar and Akolkar's names repeatedly as the shooters/killers/assailants of Dabholkar. Nandkumar Nair, head of branch, CBI Mumbai, and investigating officer additional superintendent of police S.R. Singh have signed the chargesheet.

The Bombay high court, which is supervising the Dabholkar murder case investigation, has often expressed its disappointment at the lack of progress. Last month, the high court pulled up CBI joint director and state additional secretary, home in the courtroom. Given this background, it remains to be seen how the CBI will present its new claims.

Initially, the Pune police was investigating the Dabholkar case. It had filed a case in 2014 against arms dealers Manish Nagori and Vikas Khandelwal for their alleged involvement. The police claimed that the bullets found in Dabholkar's body had been fired from the pistol/weapon seized from Nagori and his accomplices. The weapon was seized from Vikas on the day Dabholkar was killed. Nagori and Khandelwal have submitted an application demanding the closure of this case in a Pune court as the CBI has identified Pawar and Akolkar as shooters in the September 2016 chargesheet. But the case against Nagori and Khandelwal has not yet officially been closed.

The Pune police had cited a report of the Kalina forensic lab and claimed that the two bullets were fired from the same pistol seized from Khandelwal. In the chargesheet too it was said that two bullets were fired on Dabholkar from same pistol. But one of the six eyewitnesses (whose name cannot be disclosed) from Pune, according to the CBI chargesheet, has said that four bullets were fired on Dabholkar.

The Pune police and the special teams formed by the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party government could not effectively probe the case. Petitioner Ketan Tirodkar had filed a plea demanding that the Dabholkar murder case be transferred to the CBI.

In May 2014, the Bombay high court handed over the investigation to the CBI. But from May 2014 to September 2015, the state government did not send seven officers to assist the CBI as per the high court's orders. The BJP-Shiv Sena government came to power in October 2014. In September 2015, the officers were finally sent by the Maharashtra government. But crucial time had lapsed by then.

On February 16, 2015, Communist leader Govind Pansare was attacked in Kolhapur and succumbed to his injuries on February 20, 2015. Professor M.M. Kalburgi was killed in Karnataka in August 2015. The ballistic reports of the Bengaluru Forensic Lab indicated that two country-made pistols were used for the murder of Pansare. Of these, one was used to kill Kalburgi and another was used to kill

Dabholkar. But according to the Pune police's claim, the pistol that was used to kill Dabholkar had already been seized from Khandelwal in 2013. These contradictions have led to confusion.

The CBI had informed the high court that it will send the forensic evidence to Scotland Yard for further investigation. But this never happened because the required diplomatic authorisation could not be obtained. After this revelation, the high court allowed the CBI to get a new report from a laboratory in Gujarat. That forensic report's details are not yet accessible.

The Dabholkar and Pansare cases have been clubbed together and the court is supervising the investigation in both cases. So far, 26 hearings have taken place and the next hearing is scheduled for September 6. Kalburgi's wife Umadevi has approached the Supreme Court for a speedy investigation.

Although there is probable cause for a link between the killings, the investigating agencies are different. The high court has repeatedly directed that there should be smooth coordination between all agencies. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) is probing the Pansare murder case and the CBI is investigating the Dabholkar case.

Tawde's wife, Dr Nidhi, had given a statement to the SIT in the Pansare case that she and her husband were administered psychotropic drugs by Sanatan Santha members, following which the SIT raided Sanatan Santha's Panvel Ashram in 2016. But this significant element is missing from Nidhi's statement given to the CBI much earlier.

The CBI and SIT have recorded the statement of a witness under Section 164 of the Code of Criminal Procedure who reportedly said that Tawde and Akolkar had met him a few months before the Dabholkar killing to get arms and ammunition. According to a copy of his statement given to the CBI and SIT before the magistrate (and which is in the possession of this reporter), he says he repeatedly informed the Maharashtra police and ATS officials about this immediately after Dabholkar's murder in August 2013. Tawde, however, was arrested only in June 2016.

The other agency involved in this situation is the National Investigation Agency. In 2009, two Sanatan Santha members died when bombs they were carrying on a scooter went off. Six members of the Sanatan Santha were acquitted in this case. The NIA has filed an appeal in the Goa Margao bomb blast case and the case is pending. Five Sanatan Santha members are on the run since the blast. One of the common names in the Dabholkar case and Goa blast absconders is Sarang Akolkar. Dabhokar's family has many times complained that the NIA has not made any efforts to nab the absconders.

Hindu Vidhidnya Parishad advocate Sanjeev Punalekar has repeatedly said in press conferences that the absconders are in touch with him. Sanatan Santha member Prashant Juvekar had given a statement to the ATS in 2010 that Punalekar had harboured all the absconding accused of the Goa blast in Mumbai.

The NIA has given an affidavit in the Bombay high court that this case has no relation with the Dabholkar and Pansare murders. But if the identified accused Sarang Akolkar is the same one wanted by the NIA, then why can't there be greater coordination to catch the absconders? This was a question raised by advocate Abhay Nevagi, who is representing the Dabholkar and Pansare families in the high court.

The Karnataka police say they have cracked the murder of journalist Gauri Lankesh, which took place in September 2017, and collected evidence. Members of the Sanatan Santha said to be involved in the killing were arrested from Maharashtra by the Karnataka police. But in the Dabholkar case, the weapon, motorcycle and CCTV Footage are all yet to be found, and major delays continue.

Alka Dhupkar is the Editor of Symple Times, a newspaper to be launched soon by the Sakal Media Group

<https://thewire.in/rights/narendra-dabholkar-murder-case-investigations>

Courtesy: The Wire

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Dabholkar, Pansare Killings: Bombay HC 'Unimpressed' by CBI, CID's Progress

The Bombay high court criticised the central and state agencies probing the killings of rationalists Narendra Dabholkar and Govind Pansare, chiding the slow progress despite the country being in a "tragic phase".

Coming down heavily on Central and state agencies probing the killings of rationalists Narendra Dabholkar and Govind Pansare, the Bombay high court today said the authorities were not showing urgency despite the country witnessing a "tragic phase" where one cannot speak or move around freely.

A bench of justices S.C. Dharmadhikari and Bharati Dangre said it was not satisfied with the probe and returned the 'confidential reports' submitted by the Maharashtra state CID and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) with an observation that there was nothing confidential in those reports.

The bench observed that during the country's "tragic phase", one could not even speak or move around freely. The authorities in the above cases had failed to show urgency, or make concrete progress, in probing the killings, it said.

Dabholkar was shot dead on August 20, 2013 in Pune. Pansare was shot at on February 16, 2015 in Kolhapur and succumbed to injuries on February 20.

The CBI and the state CID are probing the killings of Dabholkar and Pansare, respectively.

The high court bench, which is hearing a plea filed by family members of Dabholkar and Pansare seeking a court-monitored probe in the two cases, said, "We are very unhappy. No corrective

measures have been taken. They (the officers probing both killings) have been completely inept and insensitive in handling such sensitive cases.”

“Citizens already feel that they can’t voice their concerns or opinions fearlessly. Are we going to see a day when everyone will need police protection to move around or to speak freely?” the bench said.

“What is happening in the state today? People come and torch buses, pelt stones, it is a free for all. What are your priorities? There is a state, and then there is a government. The government might change tomorrow, but what about the state that is home to millions of people? Will everyone need police protection tomorrow to speak their minds?” the court asked.

The bench said even though the senior most officers of the CID and the CBI had filed these reports directly in the judges’ chambers claiming that they contained sensitive and confidential information, the perusal of the reports by the judges had revealed that they merely contained the summary of all that the agencies had submitted, by way of progress reports in the above cases, in the past.

It also observed that the head of the special investigations team of the state CID and the CBI had been summoned in the court and yet they have filed such a rudimentary report, which shows that the government’s priorities lay elsewhere.

On the previous hearing on July 17, the CBI joint director and the head of the Maharashtra CID’s SIT had sought that they be granted a personal hearing by the bench in its chambers since they had some “sensitive” information related to their probes into the above cases which they couldn’t “share in the open court”.

The bench, however, refused such a hearing, stating that it would set a precedent. It had instead directed them to file a report on such findings directly to their chambers.

Accordingly, the CBI, the CID and the Maharashtra home department’s additional chief secretary had submitted the reports yesterday.

Returning the reports, the bench said, “What is the point of the intervention of the highest court in the state if this is the result? We are not impressed. There is nothing confidential in these reports. Is this how you deal with cases of crimes against the society?”

<https://thewire.in/security/dabholkar-pansare-killings-bombay-hc-unimpressed-by-cbi-cids-progress>

Courtesy: The Wire

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Ex-Sena Corporator Detained in Dabholkar Murder Case

Aurangabad/Mumbai: Former Shiv Sena corporator Shrikant Pangarkar was arrested by the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) on Sunday in connection with the seizure of crude bombs and weapons from different parts of the state between August 9 and 11, an ATS official said.

Pangarkar was arrested under the Explosives Act, the Explosive Substances Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, he added.

Pangarkar, a former member of the Jalna Municipal Corporation, was detained by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) last night in connection with the killing of anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar. CBI sources had said Pangarkar's name had cropped up during the interrogation of Sachin Prakashrao Andure, the alleged main shooter in the Dabholkar murder case.

Andure, who was arrested by the CBI from Pune last evening, was produced before the court of Judicial Magistrate First Class A.S. Mujumdar at Shivajinagar today and remanded to the agency's custody till August 26. The CBI told the court that Andure was one of the two assailants who had shot at Dabholkar at the Omkareshwar Bridge in Pune on August 20, 2013.

Pangarkar, aged around 40, was detained after Andure told the CBI that he was with him when Dabholkar was killed, the sources said. The former corporator was allegedly riding pillion on the motorcycle driven by Andure, they added.

Citing sources, a report in the Indian Express said that Andure has stated to have been aided by Pangarkar in assembling and storing explosives. The Shiv Sena party leadership has reportedly distanced itself from the former corporator and said that he is no longer associated with the party.

However, Arjun Khotkar, a Shiv Sena politician and minister of state for textile, animal husbandry, dairy development and fisheries admitted that several party leaders were in touch with Pangarkar and that he had indeed spoken about his links with the Sanatan Sanstha and even about "explosion" plans. The *Indian Express* report said that Arjun Khotkar too admitted to meeting him "twice or thrice in the past few years", hinting that Pangarkar had links with the controversial radical Hindu outfit, Sanatan Sanstha. And that he had even dropped hints of carrying out some blasts.

"During our conversations, when I asked him what he was doing, he said he was working for the Sanatan Sanstha in Assam, Goa and a few other states and was addressing big gatherings and holding workshops," the report quoted Khotkar as saying. "Around 10 days ago, he had met Bhaskar Ambekar, the Mumbai chief of the Sena. Later, Ambekar told me about the conversation, in which Pangarkar said to watch out for something in the future and talked about explosions. But Pangarkar didn't say anything specifically about where and how. Also, we don't know whether he was speaking the truth. Police may be able to ascertain that."

Shrikanth Pangarkar was reportedly not given a Sena ticket in 2011, following which he rebelled against the party.

Three persons – Vaibhav Raut, Sharad Kalaskar and Sudhanwa Gondhalekar – were arrested from Palghar and Pune districts on August 10 in connection with the seizure of bombs and weapons. All three are in ATS custody till August 28.

Dabholkar (67) was shot dead by two motorcycle-borne assailants on August 20, 2013, when he was on a morning walk near his home in Pune. Andure was arrested on a tip-off from the Maharashtra ATS, which had arrested Raut, Kalaskar and Gondhalekar for allegedly hatching a conspiracy to carry out blasts in the state. One of the arrested accused gave the input about Andure's involvement in Dabholkar's murder, which the ATS shared with the CBI. Dabholkar's murder case was transferred to the CBI from the Pune Police in 2014.

<https://thewire.in/rights/ex-sena-corporator-detained-in-dabholkar-murder-case>

Courtesy: The Wire

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Dabholkar probe officer on Hindu extremists' radar

Alok Deshpande

As similarities between the murders of rationalist Narendra Dabholkar, Communist leader Govind Pansare in Maharashtra, progressive thinker M.M. Kalburgi in Karnataka, and Tuesday's murder of journalist Gauri Lankesh are being discussed, details have emerged that not only journalists, but even an investigating officer probing the Dabholkar murder case is being watched.

Journalist and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Ashish Khetan has received threat letters allegedly from right wing extremist organisations for his writings and expose in the Dabholkar murder case where he had named Sanatan Sanstha members as perpetrators.

Besides Mr. Khetan, who had filed a writ petition in the Delhi High Court in July, the threat letters have mentioned Nandkumar Nair, the Central Bureau of Investigation's (CBI) Superintendent of Police probing the Dabholkar murder case, as a 'rogue element', who is 'deceiving pious Hindu saints'.

The CBI in its charge sheet in the Dabholkar murder case has named absconding Sarang Akolkar and Vinay Pawar, 'sadhaks' of Sanatan Sanstha, as two assailants. Another sadhak Virendra Tawde is in custody.

The petition, a copy of which is with The Hindu, mentioned two anonymous threat letters dated July 2016 and May 2017. "...You have crossed all limits when you abused Sanatan Sanstha and well respected Hindus. You conspired to defame Sanatan and asked for banning it. Its time to give a hisaab of all your filthy activities... As you can see we know where you live and what you are up to. Get ready to meet the same fate as Dabholkar and Pansare!" said the first letter.

The second letter said, "You have taken the help of Mr. Nandkumar Nair, who is working in CBI and is himself a rogue element and then deceived the pious Hindu Saints. Miscreants like you are fit for receiving the death sentence in a Hindutva Country and we wish that with the God's grace, this task will be fulfilled very soon."

The letter called him 'evil Shishupal' and said Mr. Khetan should be killed for his sins. "Reporters like you are the reason for pious ladies like Sadhvi Pragya have to spend so many years in jail," it said.

Both these letters have been submitted to the court by Mr. Khetan.

When contacted, Mr. Khetan said he has complained about the letters to competent authorities and even requested a meeting with Home Minister Rajnath Singh. "Neither the meeting took place nor security was provided to me."

The petition sought the court direction to lay down standard operating procedure or guidelines which shall govern such exigencies 'where a citizen of the country is being threatened with dire consequences solely on the grounds of expressing their opinion and ideologies'.

"The inaction on part of the State specifically in absence of the guidelines or standard operating procedure in cases where death threats are effortlessly issued to those who challenge the dominant ideology, be it journalists, free thinkers, rationalists, secularists, anti-superstition and critical thinkers, writers and intellectuals, will soon lead to murdering those with differing opinions or agendas on regular basis and the norm being acceptable to society as a whole," said the petition.

Mr. Nair could not be reached for comment despite several attempts.

<https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-mumbai/dabholkar-probe-officer-on-hindu-extremists-radar/article19634091.ece>

Courtesy: The Hindu

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Indian rationalism, Charvaka to Narendra Dabholkar

Seema Chishti

Exactly five years ago, on August 20, 2013, Narendra Dabholkar, Maharashtra's best known and most vocal anti-superstition activist and rationalist, was shot dead in Pune. In February 2015, Govind Pansare, another rationalist from the same state, was killed in almost identical fashion. In August that year, Prof M M Kalburgi, former Vice-Chancellor of Kannada University, was killed at his home in Dharwad. And in September last year, journalist-activist Gauri Lankesh was murdered at the door of her house in Bengaluru.

Investigations and a series of arrests made by the Maharashtra ATS and Karnataka Police point to connections among these murders, and suggest the involvement of radical Hindutva groups. All the four victims proclaimed themselves rationalists or anti-godmen, their activism and work centred on attacking superstition, they advocated a scientific temper. They communicated their message in the local language, Marathi or Kannada, and directly challenged the use of religious texts to perpetuate feudal practices.

The idea of rationalism

It is often believed that in India faith rules, and rationalism is a western stereotype. While the number of Indians who did not state their religion was only 2.9 million in the Census of 2011, this figure represented a dramatic increase over the previous Census of 2001 — when it was only 700,000.

Rationalists and sceptics who held out for scientific ideas have been a part of the Indian tradition since at least the 6th century BC. Ajita Kesakambalin, a contemporary of the Buddha, was the earliest known teacher of complete materialism. He is considered the forerunner of the philosophical tradition of the Charvakas, who privileged direct perception, empiricism and scepticism over Vedic ritualism. The original texts of the Charvakas have not survived, but references to their rationalist tradition is found in Buddhist and Jain works. The Buddha himself cautioned against accepting “what has been acquired by repeated hearing”, and encouraged contemplation and independent thinking.

Within the wider Brahminical tradition, shades of opinion prevailed between the Brahmanas and the Shramanas, and many found their beliefs in the middle. The relationship between the two extremes was characterised as that between the “snake and the mongoose”, suggesting frequent philosophical debates and struggles.

Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, who has chronicled the history of philosophy and science in India, has mentioned one Uddalaka Aruni in the Chhandogya Upanishad, who speaks of the importance observing phenomena that take place before the eyes, and not supernatural phenomena — the very essence of rationalism.

Maharashtra, elsewhere

The region that is now Maharashtra has a long history of radical thought that challenged several ideas embedded in the caste hierarchies of the Brahminical Hindu religion. It was here that Babasaheb Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, and the Republican parties carry forward his legacy in their own ways. Jyotiba Phule and Savitri Phule rejected caste and gender inequalities. The first recorded reservation in educational institutes for backward castes was instituted in Maharashtra by Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur (1894-1922).

But Maharashtra was not the only state which saw vibrant social reform. Narayana Guru in Kerala and E V Ramasamy Naicker ‘Periyar’ in Tamil Nadu were early advocates of progress. The Self-Respect movement in Tamil Nadu, and the Left movements in Kerala and West Bengal made a strong case for rationalism and egalitarianism, and rejected blind faith. In the early modern period in Bengal, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj led the charge against regressive tradition.

India's Constitution

Article 51A(H) of the Constitution of India gives a call “to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform”. The leaders of the national movement hoped that the lofty ideals of the emerging Indian state would encourage a modern and progressive outlook. Privileging a civic idea of the nation over blood or faith, caste or creed, would be vital to keep a diverse and unequal country together, they believed.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/govind-pansare-mm-kalburgi-gauri-lankesh-murder-5316465/>

Courtesy: Indian Express

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The great purge: Hindutva's Cultural Revolution

Ganesh Devy

Two apparently unrelated yet deeply interconnected events of July invite serious reflection. One belongs to an unending story of crime, the other a not-so-interesting bureaucratic muddle. One will continue to fetch headlines for long and the other will survive, if it does at all, in footnotes for researchers. Yet, both are of a piece in a larger plot threatening our republic. One is a murder story, the other is a sordid saga of a genocide of a kind.

Throughout the month of July, reports of arrests of the suspects in the Gauri Lankesh murder featured in the news. The Special Investigation Team (SIT) constituted by the Karnataka government deserves praise for getting closer to cracking the conspiracy behind the murder of several intellectuals. Those involved in the Gauri Lankesh murder are believed to have had a hand in killing Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and MM Kalburgi. Press reports tell us that many others are on the hit list. Some reports say that the list has some 50 names. The SIT will be able to ascertain or deny this.

As a result of the recovery of the list of ‘to be murdered’ writers and thinkers, some 15 writers in Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra had to be provided special security. In recent weeks, I have met several writers and thinkers who have had to move around with these security men accompanying them.

The whole sequence of murders and their fallout sends a clear signal to writers, journalists and thinkers: “do not speak or write anything that will critique the Hindutva forces and the government that tacitly supports them.”

It is another thing that many writers and journalists still show the courage to speak up when it is necessary to do so.

Yet, the atmosphere of intimidation and fear is pervasive. Earlier this week, the Goa assembly witnessed a on the threats made to writers. While Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar assured the legislature that security was being provided to the writers, he avoided answering why the organisation issuing the threat, which is located in Goa and is clearly named by the investigating agencies in Maharashtra and Karnataka is not being banned or restricted. And, therein lies the rub. Several times, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stated that violence and mob-lynching will not be tolerated. That is admirable. The only difficulty is, every time an assault takes place, it is the victim that is placed in the dock. The perpetrators continue to roam all over, unhindered, free. I now turn to the relatively less eye-catching event of July 2018. The Census of India 2011 data related to languages was released by the Census office. With all its tables and charts, it looks perfectly harmless. But, scratch the surface and you find that it is heavily doctored. It tells us that in 2011, our countrymen stated a total of 19,569 'raw returns' (read, non-doctored claims). Out of these, close to 17,000 were outright rejected and another 1,474 were dumped because not enough scholarly corroboration for them exists. Only 1,369, or roughly 6% of the total claims, were admitted as 'classified mother tongues'. Rather than placing them as languages, they were grouped under 121 headings. These 121 were declared as languages of India.

One may ask, but how does this matter? It matters because the data for Hindi has been bolstered — shown at 52 crore-plus people — by adding to its core figure of speakers, the speakers of nearly 50 other languages

These include Bhojpuri, claimed by over five crore people, and many languages in Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana and Bihar, claimed by close to a total of six crore people. At the same time, 17 of the 22 scheduled languages are reported by the Census as showing a downward trend in their rate of growth in comparison to the growth in the previous decade.

The architecture of the presentation of the language census data has at its foundation the principle of exclusion. The exclusion is imposed on the languages that the people of India have claimed in the census exercise as being their languages. To use a term from the medical sciences, this act amounts to imposing an involuntary aphasia on citizens. In this instance, the numbers on whom it is imposed run into crores of people. And that is no small matter.

Since our Constitution gives us the fundamental and non-negotiable right to free expression, and since it not only accepts but encourages the idea of a multilingual India, is there not something profoundly unconstitutional in writers and thinkers or in wilfully suppressing people's languages? The UNESCO brief for language rights describes denial of mother tongues or any wilful concealment of a mother tongue by the member-states as equivalent to genocide. A strong word, indeed, but necessary, the UNESCO thinks.

Quite ironically, the justification for both actions is drawn from a common source; and that is, a deeply flawed idea of nationalism. It holds that anyone critical of the current regime is an enemy of India, an anti-national trying to 'spread disaffection towards the State,' or in simpler words, seditious.

With respect to languages, the argument says that if we have a large multiplicity of languages, it may result in disintegration of our national territory. Love for the nation and its integrity are, of course, of prime importance. But a nation becomes great by the thought and knowledge it produces, by nurturing freedom of the mind and by the fearlessness of its citizens. States that consciously encourage creating societies that are incapable or cannot critique the system generate what in ancient Latin is described as 'hegemony'. And, governments that become intolerant of differences of opinion become heavy with hubris. Hubris and hegemony produce a pervasive mediocrity. Excessively proud rulers, intellectual mediocrity and lynch-mobs form a combine that threatens speech and forces civilisations to close their minds.

<https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/main-article/great-purge-686689.html>

Courtesy: Deccan Herald

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Scientists have established a link between brain damage and religious fundamentalism

Bobby Azarian

A study published in the journal *Neuropsychologia* has shown that religious fundamentalism is, in part, the result of a functional impairment in a brain region known as the prefrontal cortex. The findings suggest that damage to particular areas of the prefrontal cortex indirectly promotes religious fundamentalism by diminishing cognitive flexibility and openness—a psychology term that describes a personality trait which involves dimensions like curiosity, creativity, and open-mindedness.

Religious beliefs can be thought of as socially transmitted mental representations that consist of supernatural events and entities assumed to be real. Religious beliefs differ from empirical beliefs, which are based on how the world appears to be and are updated as new evidence accumulates or when new theories with better predictive power emerge. On the other hand, religious beliefs are not usually updated in response to new evidence or scientific explanations, and are therefore strongly associated with conservatism. They are fixed and rigid, which helps promote predictability and coherence to the rules of society among individuals within the group.

Religious fundamentalism refers to an ideology that emphasizes traditional religious texts and rituals and discourages progressive thinking about religion and social issues. Fundamentalist groups generally oppose anything that questions or challenges their beliefs or way of life. For this reason, they are often

aggressive towards anyone who does not share their specific set of supernatural beliefs, and towards science, as these things are seen as existential threats to their entire worldview.

Since religious beliefs play a massive role in driving and influencing human behavior throughout the world, it is important to understand the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism from a psychological and neurological perspective.

To investigate the cognitive and neural systems involved in religious fundamentalism, a team of researchers—led by Jordan Grafman of Northwestern University—conducted a study that utilized data from Vietnam War Veterans that had been gathered previously. The vets were specifically chosen because a large number of them had damage to brain areas suspected of playing a critical role in functions related to religious fundamentalism. CT scans were analyzed comparing 119 vets with brain trauma to 30 healthy vets with no damage, and a survey that assessed religious fundamentalism was administered. While the majority of participants were Christians of some kind, 32.5% did not specify a particular religion.

Based on previous research, the experimenters predicted that the prefrontal cortex would play a role in religious fundamentalism, since this region is known to be associated with something called ‘cognitive flexibility’. This term refers to the brain’s ability to easily switch from thinking about one concept to another, and to think about multiple things simultaneously. Cognitive flexibility allows organisms to update beliefs in light of new evidence, and this trait likely emerged because of the obvious survival advantage such a skill provides. It is a crucial mental characteristic for adapting to new environments because it allows individuals to make more accurate predictions about the world under new and changing conditions.

Brain imaging research has shown that a major neural region associated with cognitive flexibility is the prefrontal cortex—specifically two areas known as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC) and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC). Additionally, the vmPFC was of interest to the researchers because past studies have revealed its connection to fundamentalist-type beliefs. For example, one study showed individuals with vmPFC lesions rated radical political statements as more moderate than people with normal brains, while another showed a direct connection between vmPFC damage and religious fundamentalism. For these reasons, in the present study, researchers looked at patients with lesions in both the vmPFC and the dlPFC, and searched for correlations between damage in these areas and responses to religious fundamentalism questionnaires.

According to Dr. Grafman and his team, since religious fundamentalism involves a strict adherence to a rigid set of beliefs, cognitive flexibility and open mindedness present a challenge for fundamentalists. As such, they predicted that participants with lesions to either the vmPFC or the dlPFC would score low

on measures of cognitive flexibility and trait openness and high on measures of religious fundamentalism.

The results showed that, as expected, damage to the vmPFC and dlPFC was associated with religious fundamentalism. Further tests revealed that this increase in religious fundamentalism was caused by a reduction in cognitive flexibility and openness resulting from the prefrontal cortex impairment. Cognitive flexibility was assessed using a standard psychological card sorting test that involved categorizing cards with words and images according to rules. Openness was measured using a widely-used personality survey known as the NEO Personality Inventory. The data suggests that damage to the vmPFC indirectly promotes religious fundamentalism by suppressing both cognitive flexibility and openness.

These findings are important because they suggest that impaired functioning in the prefrontal cortex—whether from brain trauma, a psychological disorder, a drug or alcohol addiction, or simply a particular genetic profile—can make an individual susceptible to religious fundamentalism. And perhaps in other cases, extreme religious indoctrination harms the development or proper functioning of the prefrontal regions in a way that hinders cognitive flexibility and openness.

The authors emphasize that cognitive flexibility and openness aren't the only things that make brains vulnerable to religious fundamentalism. In fact, their analyses showed that these factors only accounted for a fifth of the variation in fundamentalism scores. Uncovering those additional causes, which could be anything from genetic predispositions to social influences, is a future research project that the researchers believe will occupy investigators for many decades to come, given how complex and widespread religious fundamentalism is and will likely continue to be for some time.

By investigating the cognitive and neural underpinnings of religious fundamentalism, we can better understand how the phenomenon is represented in the connectivity of the brain, which could allow us to someday inoculate against rigid or radical belief systems through various kinds of mental and cognitive exercises.

<https://www.rawstory.com/2018/03/scientists-established-link-brain-damage-religious-fundamentalism/>

Courtesy: Raw Story

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Rationalism and Scientific Temper

Dr. Narendra Dabholkar

The All Pervading Superstition

Our country is steeped in superstition. We imbibe too many dos and don'ts since our childhood, almost all of them irrational and we are not even aware of it. We get up in the morning thinking of what day it is. If it happens to be a Saturday, we are expected not to start any new, good project for it will certainly prove a failure; if it is a Sunday women should not wash their hair as this act will lead to their brother's death; Tuesday is a day when new garments if worn for the first time catch fire because Tuesday (Mangalwar) is named after the Planet Mars that is a fiery planet and so on and so forth. For doing anything we have to find out an auspicious moment and wait for it. For every little thing we are ready to surrender to God and accept His Will. As if all this is not enough we need Babas, Gurus, Buvas, Matajis, Devijis to intervene between us and the Almighty as far as Hindus are concerned. The other religionists too have their own intermediaries of this type to tell them what they should or shouldn't do. Pujaris, Priests, Maulavis and such other parasites are ever ready to help us through this arduous journey of life. We are so enamoured of these godmen and their supernatural powers as well as their sweet soothing tongue that we gladly loose our ability to think and judge and question. This is about you and me, the common people.

Men in Power: But what about those who are in power, those who are responsible for shaping and cultivating our youth, our younger generations, the future of our nation? Our erstwhile Rashtrapati visited all the live deities that never fail their devotees to take a vow that he would visit them again on being elected President of India and religiously visited them again to fulfill his vows; of course with all the entourage of a Rashtrapati. Our ministers attend the birthday celebrations of many Babas and Buvas who claim to possess supernatural powers, that as some people say is very useful for money laundering and such other essential activities! One can quote innumerable examples of these great and powerful peoples' superstitious behaviours.

Now about those who are shaping the pillars of our society's future.

Our Universities: Our universities, thankfully not all of them, have introduced a new subject-Astrology-mind you, not Astronomy, at the post graduate level. Attempts were made to introduce a novel subject, viz., Paurohitya in the University, the grand objective being the spread of our ancient Vedic culture and traditions and of course the ancient rituals all over the world. Vedic Mathematics, Vastushastra are in waiting to acquire a place in the annals of university education. Other obscure subjects like Reki, Transcendental meditation, Art of living and a number of Yogic therapies are gaining importance to day. It is not possible to deal with each of these fads separately but let us take the example of the ubiquitous Vastushastra.

Vastu Shastra: As the very name implies it is a science of building. As per the claims of the Vastushastris, their fantastic remedial changes in buildings, small and big, guarantee these Vastushastra buffs all health, wealth and happiness. Many eminent scientists and technocrats,

industrialists and businessmen, psychiatrists and surgeons, engineers and even architects themselves fall pray to this dubious science. They make many impractical and at times dangerous structural changes in their office buildings, industrial edifices and workshops, hotels and dwellings and what not, expecting that these changes will make them happy ever after. Those who are able to taste success, obviously because of their acumen, expertise and hard work, talk loudly about the efficacy of the ancient science. Those who don't, keep quiet because it's not the science of Vastu that is to be blamed but the imperfect or half hearted following of it is what brought them misery. Quite a few buildings, it is said, are dangerously damaged because of the changes made according to the requirements of Vastushastra; leave alone the unnecessary expenses and inconveniences caused because of the changes.

Our Litterateurs: This whole lot of rich and powerful does not include our literary luminaries. They are not behind any of these eminent people in acquiescing with superstitious and irrational practices in the name of tradition. One has only to recollect the way the president of the Sahitya Sammelan defended the sacrifice of a buffalo for the success of the Sammelan without any untoward happenings. Can we then blame the ignorant, superstitious poor people who sacrifice laks of goats for appeasing their deities during the Jatras. I must mention here that in the recent Mandhar Dev Jatra goat sacrifice was banned, thanks to Maharashtra Government that finally woke up after the ghastly incident of the previous year when too many lives were lost.

The Bill: Now let us turn to the bill 'The Maharashtra Eradication of Black Magic and Evil Practices and Customs Act 2005' that was recently passed in the legislative assembly banning harmful superstitious practices. The bill seeks to prohibit practice, promotion and propagation of Black Magic. A comprehensive definition of the term 'practice of Black Magic' contains the evil practices, customs, etc., and also the unauthorized and illegal practice of medicine or healing or curing by quacks, conmen and the so called godmen. Such practice is being made an offence under this act and to serve as a deterrent it is proposed to provide for a stringent penalty and punishment, making such a practice a cognizable and non-bailable offence.

The Bill also provides for the appointment of vigilance officers to detect and prevent such offences and collect evidence against the offenders. This will help to prosecute the offenders effectively. It provides for recognition of Social Organizations that are committed to social cause. They are expected to help achieve eradication of these evil practices and implementation of the provisions of law.

It empowers the court to convict and punish a person for committing an offence under this law.

Many people believe that making a law cannot eradicate blind faith and the exploitation of the poor and ignorant. What we need is awakening, education and economic well being of the people. No doubt, we need all this and many social organizations are creating awareness among the poor people and helping them to help themselves. But, you will surely agree with me that this is a long drawn process and gives respite to the unscrupulous conmen till people eventually become aware. Till then the conmen merrily go on with their nefarious activities. A law to stop these mal-practices and to bring the culprits to book

will certainly accelerate the process of educating the people and creating awareness among them. It will also give teeth to organizations that are fighting superstition.

Miracles: We have entered the 21st century with a lot of pomp and show. We have successfully sent satellites in space and improved our communication facilities tremendously due to TV and innumerable channels of entertainment and news, weather forecasting, mobile telephones and what not. We have indigenously developed our own missiles and even nuclear weapons making us independent as far as the defence of our country is concerned. We have constructed big highways and small roads reaching many small towns and villages. We use tractors and fertilizers and hybrid seeds in our agriculture. We have most talented doctors and engineers, Technocrats and management experts, economists and entrepreneurs in our country. In the field of ET, great countries like USA are alarmed at our progress. The list can grow ad infinitum. But with all this advancement we also believe in all sorts of miracles. We believe that the Baba can obtain things from thin air by just waving his hands. He is able to bless his rich and powerful devotees gold chains, diamond rings and expensive Swiss watches. We believe that there are Christian missionaries endowed with supernatural powers to make a lame person walk, to make the deaf and dumb to hear and talk and to make a blind man see clearly. We still believe that persons with supernatural powers can operate and remove cancerous growths from a person's body solely with their blessed fingers without any instruments or anesthesia. That we believe in such things and encourage their perpetrators even though we are capable of much scientific and technological advancement is the greatest miracle! I believe this is the reason why India is still a backward country. Instead of looking forward we still look into our 'glorious past' for support and sanction for any action. What are the reasons for this state of affairs?

Scientific Temper

Although we have eminent scientists and technocrats, we have failed to develop scientific temper as such in most of our scientists. No need to speak about common people who totally lack scientific temperament without which it is not possible to overcome blind faith and superstition. Let us see what scientific temperament means. Before finding out what is scientific temperament, we have to discuss how man has arrived at this enhanced state of intelligence.

Evolution of Man: Every one, except for a few adamant doctrinaires, agrees that man has evolved through millennia in the process of evolution from the lowliest animals. Scientists believe that the earth was born at least 4 ½ billion years ago. 80 % of the time since then is called the Precambrian time. Bacteria are the first living things that existed since nearly 3 ½ billion years ago. By the end of this period i.e. 1100 million years ago, Coral Jelly fish and worms lived in the sea. Cone bearing trees, fish, amphibians and reptiles appeared around 290 million years ago. Primitive apes and other mammals appeared 38 million years ago while modern human beings developed only 2 million years ago. But only in the last 10000 years have they tamed animals, developed agriculture and learned to use metals and coal. They are however progressing in leaps and bounds now. Why did it become possible for human beings, the weakest of all animals to surpass all other living things in such a short time? What are the factors responsible for this progress?

Man's Brain: The first factor that made it possible is the human brain. Man does not possess the biggest brain. His brain weighs only 1 ½ kg while an elephant's brain weighs 4 kg. But the crux of the matter is the proportionate weight of man's brain. The elephant that is around here on the earth for 40 million years has a 4 kg brain for his 4000 kg of body weight as compared to 1 1/2kg brain for 70 kg of an average man's body weight. Thus the elephant's brain is 1/1000 i.e. 1% of his body weight as compared to man's brain which is 3/140 his body, i.e. 2.14% of his body weight. A human baby is born with an especially high ratio of 12% of brain mass to body mass.

Man's Opposable Thumb: Another important factor is the opposable thumb of man. His thumb can oppose and touch any of his fingers which facility no other primate is blessed with, although the human set of genes differs very little from that of the apes. This opposing thumb has made man a tool making animal. Starting from using a simple stick man progressed in making various tools and weapons acquiring control over his surroundings.

The Speech Organ: The third factor, equally important, is man's versatile voice box that makes speech possible. With the help of this voice box and his brain, not only did man build up language but also acquired the ability of abstract thinking. His thinking has historicity as well as teleology. His thinking is historically true as well as purposeful. All this has become possible because of the language that made accumulation of knowledge gained through thousands of years and hundreds of generations feasible. Apes are not able to build such a vast store of knowledge. Now man has developed very efficient means of acquiring and storing knowledge and retrieving it at the appropriate time and the gap between man and other creatures is widening giving man control over the existence of other species.

The larger brain, the opposing thumb and the voice box developed in consonance with each other, enhanced man's capacity to think, to investigate, to experiment and draw conclusions. But out of the 2 million years that man has been around on this planet earth, he began a settled life only about the last 10000 years ago. The earlier 1 ½ million years of his existence were spent dwelling in caves. The invention of fire gave him some sort of security. Invention of agriculture brought stability in his life. But the Scientific Era ushered in around 500 years back due to the scientific temperament has revolutionized his life altogether.

Indian Inventions and Scientific Temper: Many patriotic Indians claim that the Scientific Outlook is nothing new to us. We had airplanes and atom bombs in the ancient times. We called them Pushpak Viman and Brahmastra. Granting this just for the sake of argument, the question arises where did all this technology that we are so proud of disappeared? And more importantly why such an advanced nation has now reached an abominable present state where many of our compatriots suffer from utter poverty, failure of crops for lack of water, power cuts and inadequate transport facility and other infrastructure? Whatever we had, although debatable was certainly not the philosophy of what we presently call the Scientific Temperament. What we did have were computations, estimates, conjectures and sometimes conclusions arrived at after long and consistent study and observations.

India's Contribution in the Past: Through this endeavour India contributed considerably to the world's knowledge reserve. The invention of zero by Bhaskaracharya that helped solve the difficulty in writing (or even thinking) of huge sums in mathematics; the discovery of combining copper, silver or gold to form amalgamates made by Nagarjuna, Amarsinha's classification of plants and animals, Sushruta's skill in surgery (including the rudiments of what is called Plastic surgery today) and development of instruments that were required for it and the Ayurvedic Medicinal system have made great contribution to the progress of humanity and the world has acknowledged it. Varahmihir knew that the sun is a star and in the 5th century AD Arya Bhatta proposed that not the earth but the sun is the center around which the earth revolves. It was difficult for people in those days to understand how one can stand on the ground that is constantly moving under his feet or come back to his hearth and home after leaving it in the morning when the earth will carry it away. This discourse of refuting Aryabhata's proposition was a healthy sign of being mentally alert. But alas! It lasted only till the end of the 5th century.

The great contributions that India made till then were the outcome of meticulous observations, inferences drawn from experience and discussions. This process of thinking can not be called Scientific Temperament. After this, the next 11-12 centuries were simply barren as far as Science was concerned. There had been a few good kings, philosophers and *littérateurs*, but no scientists. The discourses carried out by Indians during this period consisted of traditions, rituals, religion, Philosophy or at the most politics. But the rest of the world was speedily going in a totally different direction. In 1550 the Portuguese brought the art of printing to Goa. But we took 300 years to bring this revolutionary invention to India.

What is Scientific Outlook: That our society should be devoid of scientific temperament was not acceptable to our Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. So she made an amendment to the constitution in 1976 to include a citizen's responsibility into it. So far the constitution included only the rights of the citizens and among the responsibilities was the most important one, viz., 'Every citizen has the responsibility to propagate Scientific Outlook, Inquisitive Intellect and Humanism.' Rajeev Gandhi included an important core factor in his 'Declaration on the Educational Policy'. Inculcating Scientific Temperament was one of the main objectives of education according to it. Let us discuss in brief what is this 'Scientific Outlook or Temperament' and why is it considered so important? It is not at all hard to find out what it is. We will go step by step with the constituents of Scientific Temperament.

All of us wittingly or unwittingly make use of it in our workaday life because whether we like it or not, we are born with the ability to think logically! It means that to believe in anything, we need evidence of its being true. A child will refuse to hold a burning piece of charcoal in his hands even if ordered to do so because he 'knows that it will burn his fingers' through his own or some other person's experience; he has enough evidence to believe so. Scientific outlook will not let us believe in anything unless we have evidence to do so. Collecting enough evidence is an important constituent of this outlook.

Now the question arises as to how to verify the evidence that we collect. The method of doing this is called the Scientific Method. It consists of four factors: Observation, Reasoning, Inference and

Verification. Verification has three aspects. It should be done directly. Secondly 'Verifying a fact' just once is not enough. It should be verified again and again and found to be true every time provided the conditions are same. And thirdly verification should be possible at any place, any time and by any body which means it should be universal. So verification should fulfill these three conditions- it should be direct, duplicable and universal. Suppose for example, someone tells you that such and such Baba gives a charmed ring that gives an unemployed person a job within a month of his wearing that ring on his finger. Not only he but his friend too who worn that ring got a job within a month. Is this much evidence of its effectiveness enough? Certainly not. You need a large number of such cases to draw any conclusion. More over your friend does not tell you how many men and women wearing these rings did not get any job. But you can verify this claim by distributing several such enchanted rings to hundreds of unemployed young men, spread all over the country and tell them to use the rings and report if they do or don't get employment within a month. And again you will have to repeat this experiment several times to see whether you get results consistently at different periods of time. If the results of these tests repeated in time as well as places and by different people are statistically significant, then only can we say that the claim is true since our verification would be direct, duplicable and universal.

Then comes the stage of Experiment. After verifying the evidence one can draw conclusions which are to be tested again through experimentation. When proved repeatedly it becomes a theory. Again experimentation to test any theory should be possible for any body at any time any where. During the last century science has matured so much that theories are built not on the basis of direct observation and experience but through thought process. Einstein conceived his theory of special relativity not through direct experiment but through a 'Thought Experiment'. Among other predictions, he predicted that as any body travels faster, approaching the speed of light, that body is compressed in the direction of motion, its mass increases and time as it experiences slows down. It has been proved by experience. Very accurate clocks carried in supersonic jet planes slow down a little compared to stationary clocks. Nuclear accelerators are designed to allow for the increase of mass with increasing speed; the accelerated particle would otherwise smash into the walls of the apparatus. But even this theory will be discarded if any evidence contradicting any of its prediction is made available. It is believed to be true only as long as it works and gives results.

This method of collecting and verifying facts, drawing conclusions from them, and constructing theories to be proved or disproved through further evidence and experimentation and thereby add to humanity's vast store of knowledge is Scientific Method. And those who use this method to acquire knowledge as a base for their belief do have a Scientific Temperament. Our ancient Astronomers, Chemists- Metallurgists, Mathematicians, Architects and Engineers, Ship Builders, Medicine Men, Surgeons and all were truly great men but they did not possess this scientific temperament. There was not much criticism, debate or discourse on their assumptions, inferences, findings or theories. Their theories were not put to use for the benefit of the common people. There was hardly any experimentation.

Even in Europe, the change in attitude of the people has taken place only five/six centuries ago. Since Renaissance Europe was intellectually stirred. Thomas More in his 'Utopia' 1 and 2 exposed the shallowness and pomposity of the high society. A tradition of Rational Philosophy was ushered in by Spinoza, and Liberalism propagated by John Lock. Bruno, Francis Bacon, Rene de Carls and later Voltaire and David Hume gave impetus to both rational, secular and liberal traditions. On the other hand Guttenberg brought literacy to common man, Copernicus, Galileo, Harvey with their discoveries in astronomy and physiology shattered the very foundation of God and religion. With the steam engine invented by James Watts began the industrial revolution. Side by side the reformation movement started making politics secular which finally culminated into a movement for separation of the church and the state. Pursuit of knowledge, science and experimental method, dignity of crafts and mechanical arts began rolling in full speed. The French Revolution and the American Revolution brought in democracy i.e. rule of the people, for the people, by the people along with the principles of Equality, Fraternity and freedom. This kind of intellectual, political and societal churning did not take place in India. As a result the scientific temperament could not be engendered in the minds of common people. They remained ignorant and superstitious, gullible and helpless. This does not mean that there are no superstitious people in the West, but about it later.

The Scientific Temperament has moral and ethical content. It tries to tell us how a human being should look at his life. The first point is the need to look at any problem comprehensively. When in 1993 the monsoons failed in Maharashtra, the Governor of the state appealed to the people to pray to their respective gods to send rains. Here what is needed is not religious minds and their ardent prayers but a comprehensive study of why the monsoons fail, what could be done to ameliorate people's hardships caused by it and strive to find a permanent solution to this recurring problem. It is known the world over that if the rain water is stopped from flowing and is allowed to be soaked up by the soil, about 500 mm of rain is enough to provide drinking water and other needs of the people and in addition enough water for one annual crop with appropriate water management. This has been successfully tried at places like Aadgaon and Ralegan Siddhi by Vijay Borade and Anna Hajare.

The second point is the principle is Autonomy. It means that this universe is self existing. It is bound by cause –effect relationship and the cause-effect relation of every event can be traced. Although we are not yet able to establish such relationship for every event-e.g. the cause of cancer- but we know the method and would be able to do so sooner than later. That is why we can be sure that it is not controlled by any external agency, good or evil. It, therefore follows that we need not worship any agency that is capable of doing good by us nor do we need to appease any evil agency in order not to incur its wrath. Nothing that is not in consonance with the natural laws can happen in this universe. Denial of any outside controlling agency makes our life much less arduous.

Next is to cultivate our innate tendency to search for truth, trying to find out the root cause of every thing that happens around us. Our curiosity drives us to discover the secrets of nature that happen to be beyond our understanding. Some times these truths avail us nothing and religion tells us that we

should not wish to learn them. Yet no advance in civilization would have been possible if human beings had not cultivated and used their curiosity.

Scientific temperament involves one more value, i.e. fearlessness. Any newly discovered scientific truth invariably invites bitter opposition by the established system-religion, state, tradition or whatever. Of course in the 20th and 21st centuries scientific research and findings and the scientists are respected. But had the scientists like Bruno, Galileo, Darwin succumbed to the pressure and threats of the church and the state, we still would believe that the earth is flat and still gloating over the assurance that God has made man in his own image. Nearly 70 years back Dr. D.D. Karve urged and entreated people to perceive the danger of population explosion and take steps to control it. He was ridiculed and practically ostracized by the society. He was even indicted in the court of law for using vulgar language. But he never relented and pursued his mission of making people aware of the menace and take precaution in time. Had his message been heeded to a number of today's problems would not have been there.

The last and the most important value of scientific temper is humility. It never takes the position that any truth discovered by this approach is the ultimate truth. Every one should accept it since there is nothing beyond that truth. Religions, on the other hand claim to know every thing including the ultimate truth and reality. They cannot tolerate any disbelief. Science, on the contrary maintains that whatever it knows is based on the presently available evidence and if any contradictory evidence comes to light, the present position will have to be changed. For religions the word of their prophets is final and should not be doubted.

Healthy, Critical Life Stance: Why did we fail to develop a critical, healthy stance towards life in our society, while it could take roots in the Western society to at least some extent? There are a number of reasons for this.

The first is the dictatorship of the head of the family. In Marathi it is aptly called 'Baba Wakyam Pramanam.' It means the wish of the head of the family is every body's command. We never consult our children for taking any decision. Nor is any problem discussed in the family with all members freely applying their minds and expressing their views. The head of the family necessarily is the father or a male member. Even the mother has no say in this matter. Surprisingly most women willingly let their husbands take decisions without their being consulted.

The second reason in my opinion is our tendency to idolize great men. Shivaji, Babasaheb Ambedkar and now many 'great' political leaders are idolized by their followers. Any unflattering word uttered regarding them provokes their followers to teach you a fitting lesson. Once Kamal Padhye and her husband Prabhakar Padhye attended a private musical concert along with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. In her Memoirs, 'Bandha-Anubandha,' Kamal Padhye casually mentioned that Babasaheb did not really understand classical music. This innocuous statement provoked a Dalit friend, 'how dare this woman write such a thing about the great man that Babasaheb was!' The fact is that not understanding classical music does not make Babasaheb less great. Yet one should abstain from pointing out any

limitation in 'their' great hero although he too is a mortal human being. This idolization hampers free thought and in turn development of Scientific Attitude.

Veracity of tradition is one more reason of this stagnating attitude. When criticism is not tolerated in the family and criticism of great men is a taboo, religion-customs-traditions are, as you might expect, sacrosanct. Many of our traditions and customs are harmful and economically wasteful. But we insist that they ought to be observed. Take the example of 'Akshata' - the rice colored with vermillion is showered on the heads of the couple getting married. In one marriage 5 to 10 kg rice is used up. Every year three lacs marriages are performed in Maharashtra causing a colossal waste of thirty lacs kg of rice. But people hate being told that instead of wasting this rice literally throwing it to the wind it could be given to some charitable institution.

From child hood we are expected not to ask questions. This is one important reason why we have failed to develop a healthy critical life stance. Our educational system engenders rote learning and not enquiry and asking questions. The child is full of curiosity and wants to know how and why of every thing. But the policy in the house is that a child is to be seen and not heard. In the school, the teacher has so many brats on her hands and has to 'finish' the course in the syllabus. She cannot afford to waste time in answering worthless rubbish questions. The child is expected to sit like an idol of a deity - speechless, motionless, unconcerned and uninvolved - only listening and trying to grasp what the teacher says.

Scientific Outlook and Morality: People often ask me, 'Dr.Dabholkar, you talk so much about this blessed Scientific Outlook. Do you really think that developing this kind of outlook or life stance is all that one needs to do? Is it going to make the whole world happy? Why is America, despite being such an advanced state scientifically and technologically, beset with so many problems?' Here we must keep in mind that Americans with all their advance in science have yet make this life stance their own. They have not yet fully imbibed the scientific outlook. Similarly in our country, too, no doubt science and education has spread. But the fact remains that today's educated scientists too are not as steeped in scientific attitude as were the workers of the 'Satyashodhak' movement were 100 years back. Scientific outlook is the most appropriate way of acquiring right and precise knowledge. It does not promise answers to all questions But it does start the process of getting answers. Going beyond acquisition of knowledge, people behave morally or immorally according to their own outlook, scientific or religious. One with a Scientific Outlook can be a cruel man like Stalin or the most religious Harshad Mehta who abstained from even onions and garlic on religious grounds can cheat people of their hard earned money and the whole monetary system by thousands of crores of rupees. The behavior of a person depends on his discretion, his understanding of what is good and what is not, his moral values which is related to rationality. Morality is developed through a man's thinking and reasoning. It is rightly said that 'right thinking is the way to right conduct'. The conduct of a religious person may be right but right thinking and reasoning cannot be devoid of scientific attitude. Rationality, that is better expressed in Marathi as 'Vivek' is, therefore Scientific Outlook + moral values (or value system).

Utility of Scientific Outlook

The scientific outlook is necessary for solving individual problems as well as national problems. The problems of common people's life are decided by the society and many times the decisions are taken at the level of high government officials. Sometimes the policy decisions that affect the common people most are taken without any consideration for the hardships that they are likely to suffer. But if all people approach their problems with a scientific outlook, all the parties will have better understanding of the problems and their response will be positive. But in India where ever we go-may be factory, a farm, an office or even a cabinet meeting- each individual is provided with minimum information. Criticizing or asking questions is not allowed. A person is expected to do the job allotted to him quietly. No wonder we have failed to develop a proper productive work culture. Now take a look at this contrast. Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Damodar Valley Project while it was under construction. He approached one of the labourer there, put his hand over his shoulder and asked him, 'Bhai, do you have any idea as to what you are going to raise here?' The poor man had absolutely no idea about the dream project of Nehru and nodded his head in the negative. All that he knew was to fill the huge pit by bringing ballast from elsewhere. Nehru called a meeting of the managerial staff and explained to them about the necessity of enlightening the workers regarding the whole project, its need for the nation and how it will fulfill those needs and that he is a part of this process of nation building. How far Nehru's advice was heeded to, there is no way of knowing. But this is a scientific approach whereby every body knows what he is doing, why he is doing it, what will be the consequence of his action and what is his responsibility. To day in almost all countries half the scientists and technologists are employed in projects on military matters. They get their salaries, perquisites and power and also public honor at the highest levels. But none of them is ever expected to accept responsibility for their action –be it nuclear reactor for power generation or any weapon of mass destruction. Had they developed a real scientific Outlook they would think of the consequence of their output and in all probability would refuse to work there. Many scientists during the 2nd World War were apprehensive of participating in the development of atom bomb.

This maturity of understanding is required at all levels. It can be brought about only by engendering the scientific outlook from the very beginning. This alone can bring the broad and essential social change. A Brahmin or any other upper caste Hindu will better understand the difficulties of tribal or lower caste person and help him achieve equality with him whereas a staunch Hindu upper caste man will never accept that those lowly creatures are really his equals. The border issues national as well as provincial will be solved if all the parties think rationally keeping their wishes and desires out of the picture and not succumbing to them.

It is said that our Bharat going to be really Mahan in 2020. India will then be a superpower. What are our criteria for being called a great nation? Is it that we will have a hydrogen bomb instead of the atom bomb or we may produce missiles of very large range and accuracy or we will have a 'Parama-Parama Computer? But what about those devious distinctions- 54% of the world's illiterate, very high child mortality and mothers dying during labour, 300000 villages without drinking water, etc.- that too we will

have achieved by then? There is no alternative to right thinking i.e. Scientific Outlook that will give us a broader perspective of social change if we want to bring about human happiness.

Scientific Outlook has two rules to be scrupulously observed.

- There are no sacred truths. All assumptions must be critically examined. Arguments from authority have no place. And
- Whatever is inconsistent with facts be discarded or revised. One must understand the cosmos as it is and not how it should be according to some prophet or philosopher or spiritualist. Obvious is sometimes false and unexpected is at times true. So everything ought to be verified.

Translated By Ms Suman Oak

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Why developing a scientific temper is essential for Indian democracy to flourish

Niruj Mohan Ramanujam

On Friday, after unusually intense rainfall caused Kerala to be inundated by worst floods it had experienced in a century, a tweet by newly appointed Reserve Bank of India board member S Gurumurthy sparked horror. The co-convenor of the Swadeshi Jagran Manch suggested that the disaster may have been a manifestation of the anger of the god Ayyappan because some women have filed a case in the Supreme Court demanding that they too be allowed into the state's Sabarimala shrine, which bars the entry of women between the ages of 10 and 50.

Gurumurthy's statement isn't an anomaly. Over the last month, the media has reported cases that demonstrate how the absence of a scientific person can literally be deadly. In Kerala's Idukki, a man killed four members of his family in an attempt to gain divine powers. In Moradabad in Uttar Pradesh, a couple in Uttar Pradesh killed their six-year-old daughter who had rickets after a self-claimed godman said that this would ensure that their next child would be healthy. In Tamil Nadu's Tiruppur, a woman died in childbirth because her husband did not trust doctors and decided to deliver their baby himself, following YouTube videos.

This is exactly the attitude that Narendra Dabholkar fought against. The founder of the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti or Maharashtra Blind faith Eradication Committee, Dabholkar worked tirelessly to attempt to spread a scientific temper and the ideas of rationalism. For his efforts, he was assassinated on August 20, 2013, by assailants who are yet to be caught. To carry his ideas forward, the All India Peoples Science Network, a network of over 40 Peoples Science Movements, has declared August 20 as the National Scientific Temper Day. Dabholkar's understanding of scientific temper was insightful: "As much belief as there is evidence for."

Constitutional duty

As it turns out, this is something the Constitution requires every Indian to do. Says Article 51A(h), “It shall be the duty of every citizen ... to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform.” The term “scientific temper” is uniquely Indian. It was formulated by Jawaharlal Nehru. In his book *The Discovery of India*, he says that scientific temper is “... the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial, the capacity to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence, the reliance on observed fact and not on pre-conceived theory”. Since Independence, many rationalist societies and Peoples Science Movements have been formed around India to promote interest in science and scientific temper.

Science and scientific temper are not synonymous. Scientific temper is a way of thinking critically and rationally, the ability to question what is told to us, and not be satisfied with an answer just because it is uttered by or with authority. Scientific temper is something that all of us possess and is as much a social and political tool as it is a scientific one. It is, as Nehru said, “... the spirit of the free man”.

Our education system teaches us that science is a collection of facts that have been proclaimed by scientists. In reality, it is a systematised method of investigating the material world through observation, experimentation, hypothesis and verification. Science assumes that all phenomena are natural rather than supernatural, that these operate by rules that humans have the ability to uncover. More and more areas of knowledge, traditionally deemed not knowable, have yielded their secrets to the method of science. Scientific temper is about applying similar methods of questioning, and of rational enquiry in our everyday lives.

‘Nothing is infallible’

Inculcating a scientific temper among citizens is a part of democratisation of society. Social reformers from Socrates, Buddha, and Lokayatas in ancient times to the rationalist movement led by Periyar in modern times have used scientific temper to effect social change. As BR Ambedkar says in his work *Buddha or Karl Marx*, “Nothing is infallible. Nothing is binding forever. Everything is subject to inquiry and examination.”

Ironically, in recent times, some Indians have developed a distrust in science even as they believe everything they read on social media. They blindly forward messages that claim that lemon juice cures cancer or that the Sun will disappear for a day. Worse, recent years have seen government officials mixing up literature with fact. As an All India Peoples Science Network statement issued in June says, “Pseudo-histories and anti-scientific views are being incorporated into school curricula and college/university teaching. So-called ‘research’ to ‘prove’ pseudo-scientific claims in both the sciences and social sciences are being officially funded by government.”

Scientific temper teaches us how to question, but the freedom to question is equally crucial. The statement goes on to say, “The aggressive anti-science and anti-rational atmosphere whipped up by obscurantist forces with official support has generated a climate of intimidation and even violence in an attempt to suppress a scientific outlook and critical thinking in our educational and intellectual institutions.”

On National Scientific Temper Day, perhaps we Indians will take the opportunity to question these attitudes as we ponder the theme set for the event: “Ask Why.”

<https://scroll.in/article/891052/why-developing-a-scientific-temper-is-essential-for-indian-democracy-to-flourish>

Courtesy: Scroll.in

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National Scientific Temper Day: Remembering Our 'Duty' To Develop A Spirit Of Inquiry

Arnab Bhattacharya

A ping on my phone told me that I had been added to the NSTD Mumbai Whatsapp group. NSTD? National Scientific Temper Day, 20 August, as I soon figured out. I'd never heard of it before, so I thought I'd do a quick check: 20 August is Sadhbhavana Divas (connected to Rajiv Gandhi) and Akshay Urja Divas (for renewable energy), and even World Mosquito Day (not a joke!) commemorating the work of Ronald Ross on the deadliest animal in the world, the mosquito.

And of course, I noted a new addition to the list, National Scientific Temper Day in India.

Before I could even think about the need for a special occasion to celebrate scientific temper, a look at the daily dose of randomly forwarded messages provided the immediate answer. From someone taking the lack of dead birds on the ground to imply that birds don't die but float up beyond the atmosphere, to people recirculating an oft-seen video clip suggesting that the Hindi word for geography *bhugol* is evidence that ancient Indians knew the world was round "many thousands" of years ago, it was amply clear that even supposedly well-educated adults had simply lost the ability to think critically. A reminder was indeed called for.

India is perhaps the only nation where the constitution mandates — through Article 51A (h) — that citizens have a fundamental duty "to develop scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform".

The phrase “scientific temper” is a legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru, who used this succinct term to describe rational thinking and reasoning based on evidence rather than pre-conceived notions. He was convinced this was important not just for things that dealt explicitly with science but in various aspects

of life. Developing such a scientific temper would have no doubt been a challenge in a young nation. But even after 71 years of independence, we still seem to be unwilling to adopt an attitude of critical thinking, and live in a world steeped in superstition, unable to disentangle mythology and science, and unfortunately susceptible to rumours that modern technology allows one to spread with remarkable ease.

Rather than encourage children to question and seek out evidence that would guide them to an answer, we compel them to memorise and reproduce what is in a textbook. In fact, any attempt to write something that is not the “standard answer” would, even if correct, be penalised! The whole purpose of laboratories is for experimentation, however, this is rarely ever the case. From my daughter’s personal experience (in a supposedly “good” school) the summer vacation was spent “finishing the journal” – ie writing up the observations and conclusions before doing any experiments, with the data to be filled in later. If at all, we motivate students *not* to think for themselves!

In science especially, this is dangerous and leads to many misconceptions in basic understanding.

For example, take the rather straightforward question of why a candle flame goes off when one blows it out. I’ve asked this question to hundreds of students and teachers in multiple schools in metros, smaller cities and even in rural settings. The most common answer seems to be “due to the carbon dioxide in the air we exhale”

However, respiration is not 100 percent efficient in converting all the oxygen in the air we inhale into carbon dioxide. Even exhaled air has about 16 percent oxygen, enough to allow a candle to burn, which can be shown by a very simple experiment. The danger from such misconceptions is that it allows people to believe statements without being careful enough to critically think about them.

In 2017, the education minister of an Indian state went on record claiming that the “cow is the only animal that inhales and exhales oxygen”. Clearly, this statement is not false by itself. *All* animals exhale the oxygen that was not used in respiration. But the way the statement was made, the unfortunate impression that was conveyed to most people (that perhaps the minister himself believes in), is that the cow was some special creature that somehow generated more oxygen than it breathed in.

Further, given the strong hierarchical structures in society, be it in education or politics, and our reverence to authority, we tend to trust what is said by our leaders too easily, without asking questions. This makes it easy, for people in positions of authority to spread misinformation, often unintentionally, since even they may have never questioned things themselves.

It hence behooves people in positions of responsibility, especially those connected to science and technology or education to be careful with their statements, and ensure that their beliefs do not get in the way of their official duties. Alas, many of the statements made in the recent past by our leaders have been not just disheartening, but at times laughable.

From the existence of the Internet or genetic engineering in ancient India to the denial of Darwinian evolution, several indefensible statements have been made. Some of the statements were so outrightly

ludicrous that they led to widespread protests in the scientific community, and even had to be corrected by the Science Academies, which have traditionally not engaged readily in such circumstances.

The root of the problem is not in the isolated and thoughtless statements made by a minister. It lies in the overall ethos of our society — of the public at large ready to accept what they read or hear without questioning. From herbal shampoos with “all-natural” ingredients to the lucky colour of the week in the astrology column, and from magnetic soles that promote healthy circulation to oxyrich water (with 300 percent more oxygen!), we are happy to take things at face value. While it is always good to have dedicated a day to allow such topics to be brought up, debated and discussed, more than a National Science Temper Day, India needs science temper nationally every day.

<https://www.firstpost.com/tech/science/national-scientific-temper-day-remembering-our-duty-to-develop-a-spirit-of-inquiry-4998071.html>

Courtesy: firstpost.com

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Scientific Temper & Political Discourse

Nitin Desai

Thousands of scientists, academics and students staged a March for Science in August 2017 and April 2018 all over India. Inspired by a global movement, these marches were also a protest against the growing evidence of a lack of respect for science in the political discourse in recent years.

This year's March for Science took place on April 14, which is Ambedkar Jayanti. This is truly appropriate as the restoration of a scientific temper will help to counter the false beliefs that underlie oppression and violence in society.

The examples of false beliefs voiced from the pulpits of politics are many. We aim for a digital revolution; yet one leader believes that: “Internet and satellite communication had existed in the days of Mahabharata. How else could Sanjaya give detailed account and description to the blind king about the battle of Kurukshetra? It means internet was there, the satellites and that technology was there in this country at that time.”

We badly need medical research: but some ruling politicians are convinced that: “Cow dung and urine can cure cancer,” “Cows exhale oxygen”, “Karna was not born from mother's womb. This means that genetic science was present at that time”, “We worship Lord Ganesha. There must have been some plastic surgeon at that time who got an elephant's head on the body of human being and began the practice of plastic surgery”.

We have an ambitious nuclear programme and a political leader informs us: “Maharshi Kanad had conducted a nuclear test during his time” (referring to a sage who may have lived more than two thousand years ago who actually believed that atoms cannot be destroyed). As for basic science some

leaders would have us believe: “Darwin’s theory is wrong. Nobody...ever saw an ape turn into a human being” and “Astrology is the biggest science. It is, in fact, above science.

It does not stop at a stray remark here and there. The memorandum that the scientists sent to the prime minister alleges that “untested and unscientific ideas are being introduced into the school textbooks and curricula.” One example from a school textbook says: “Indian *rishis* using their *yoga vidya* would attain *divyadrishhti*. There is no doubt the invention of television goes back to this”.

Even scientific meetings are being distorted, one egregious event being the paper presented at the Indian Science Congress in 2015 that argued that Vedic sages knew more about aeronautics than modern scientists and made planes, used even for interplanetary travel, ‘that were huge in size and could move left, right, as well as backward, unlike modern plane which only fly forward’.

The pride in our past is not the problem. There is much that is admirable in the scientific achievements of the mathematicians, astronomers and medical scientists of ancient India such as Aryabhata, Brahmgupta and Bhaskar, Sushruta and Charaka. For them truth was universal and science was international. The extensive contacts with Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece in ancient times and Arab scholars in medieval times enriched both us and them.

But the political discourse today does not refer to these proven achievements and prefers the wild claim that are possible when myth, metaphor and fact are confused. It reflects privileging of scriptures over evidence-based history. As the appeal made by many scientists in August 2017 said: “While we can justly be inspired by the great achievements in science and technology in ancient India, we see that non-scientific ideas lacking in evidence are being propagated as science by persons in high positions, fuelling a confrontational chauvinism in lieu of true patriotism that we cherish.”

This vulgarization of our past is not just an affront to the idea of science but an attack on our history. Worse still, it legitimizes the prejudices of lynch mobs and assassins. It also vulgarizes scriptures and our rich inheritance of metaphysical speculations on the nature of reality. Ancient and medieval Indian society was very tolerant about philosophical, religious and ritual diversity. This included a strong and persistent materialist tradition called *Charvak* or *Lokayata*, because it was widespread in the populace (*‘ayatahlokeshu’*). The exposition of this philosophy in *Sarva Darshana Sangrah*, written by Madhavacharya, the 14th century of the Shringeri Math brings out clearly how close it is to the rationalist and empirical approach of modern science including the subtle nuance of the Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Theory that science cannot tell us what nature is but only what we can validly say about nature.

The frontiers of knowledge lie in the realm of the unknown and the future and not in the known or the past. We want to be there, at the frontier, with the pioneers. But for our quest to be credible, politicians should stop mouthing nonsense about science. More substantially, we must recognize that:

A knowledge society should have scientific temper and nationalist ethos, with a belief in science and systematic evidence as a basis for belief. Superstition and quackery may well exist but would be considered a form of deviant behavior by most people.

A knowledge society should encourage free inquiry and be tolerant of dissent since its world view must be essentially skeptical with no rigid view about eternal truths. It must be particularly tolerant of intellectual mavericks who, even if they are wrong, help to hone and sharpen the edge of knowledge.

A knowledge society must be guided by a profound curiosity about the world. Tolerance must rest not on just on the belief that truth may lie elsewhere than in the space one occupies, but in a deep curiosity to explore unknown realms of thought and belief.

A knowledge society must be venturesome, ready to stake time and resources to chase what appears to be wild ideas.

A knowledge society must believe in sharing knowledge with others on the same path.

Such a restoration of scientific temper in society is essential for the future we want and for countering the social violence that has become widespread.

Courtesy: Business Standard

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The Politics of Indian Pseudoscience and What We Need to Do to Tame It

Jaya Ramchandani

Should the Indian media pay as much attention as it does to our politicians' pseudoscientific claims? *The Print* had posed this question to me recently – making an apparent reference to the debate between those who say we should simply focus on 'good science' and reinforce its traits and those who believe 'bad science' is an opportunity for journalists to uncover deeper issues.

For example, when junior education minister Satyapal Singh said, "Darwin's theory is scientifically wrong" or when Uttarakhand chief minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank said, "Astrology is the biggest science. It is in fact above science. We should promote it."

It's no secret that some Indian ministers have been trying to rewrite Indian scientific history, and such claims are part of that story.

Science communicators and journalists should definitely continue to focus on these stories, but perhaps with a more investigative narrative – shifting the focus from the politician to the problem. We can use these sensational instances as opportunities to tackle more systemic problems, offering context and analysis, and reach the people with critical insights.

Importance of scientific literacy

For example, Satyapal Singh seems to be missing the essence of the scientific method – and what about the story of evolution is scientific.

Science is a type of knowledge system concerned with the observation of phenomena through controlled and repeatable experiments. Scientific knowledge is not a fixed or static body of work. Instead, it's a process and, like all processes, it evolves. New fields emerge with conceptual shifts in these processes.

If Singh had understood this as well as how evolution itself is evolving as more evidence comes to the fore (e.g., the recent spate of articles questioning parts of the out of Africa theory), his statement would perhaps be different.

Curiously enough, he has an MPhil in chemistry. So either Singh was and is a bad student of science, or his intentions behind these statements are political.

When Pokhriyal says, "Astrology is the biggest science. It is in fact above science. We should promote it," there again seems to be a misunderstanding about what science is, what it stands for, and betrays an inability to distinguish science from pseudoscience.

Pseudoscience is a collection of beliefs or practices mistakenly regarded as being based on the scientific method. Astrology is considered a pseudoscience because, when subjected to the processes of science, researchers have found no evidence connecting astronomical phenomena with human personalities or events. So if someone would like to establish astrology as a way of knowing, they'd have to figure out how. And it doesn't happen simply by calling astrology a science.

Like Singh, Pokhriyal is well-educated, so here again the problem seems to be more than about breaking a misconception of what science is.

It's important to acknowledge that scientific processes are not free from bias, socioeconomic and political, and as with any process, stronger checks and balances need to be put in place.

So do we, as science communicators and educators, need to facilitate and stimulate dialogue to upskill our political cadre on what science is – or do we need to accept the reality that such statements have little to do with what science is and more so with political considerations?

Or, of course, should we instead use these statements as opportunities to begin conversations with the members of our audience so they know how to evaluate such statements when they are made and open up a healthy debate on biases in science?

If we shift focus to the intentions behind these statements, which seems to be asserting the superiority of Hindu traditional knowledge, it doesn't take long to conclude that an effective antidote is to raise the scientific literacy of the country. According to G.S. Rautela and Kanchan Chowdhury, scientific literacy includes the following elements (quoting verbatim from a 2015 paper):

1. Knowledge of basic facts of science
2. An understanding of methods of science i.e. keen observations, questioning, reasoning, experimental design, drawing conclusions and understanding
3. An appreciation of the positive outcomes of science and technology

4. The rejection of unfounded beliefs and obscurantism.

This literacy is an urgent and important issue for modern India. The processes and products of science touch almost every aspect of our lives, and we are a country that is largely scientifically illiterate, and so not equipped with the tools to interpret and analyse statements made by our leaders.

The lack of relevant literacy skills threatens society. We've seen this enacted at a national scale most recently with Brexit, where most voters in the referendum were not fully aware of the consequences of their actions.

K. Vijay Raghavan, India's new principal scientific adviser, has called for more non-English science communication at the education, research and society levels. His idea is that to make a society aware of something, they must be able to access information about it in a language they are comfortable with. So to raise the scientific literacy in India, we have to start with expanding the language of science to regional languages.

And misconceptions are a useful entry point for pedagogy. Science communicators and educators can use these instances as opportunities to simply talk about science, in the classroom or on the street. However, the conversation would be incomplete without addressing the need to situate traditional Hindu knowledge as superior to other forms.

Decolonising knowledge

For example, all of us by now have been exposed to and have tried to make sense of India's cow politics, which has of late solicited scientific credentials as well. Recently, the government commissioned a research project to 'scientifically' validate the benefits of *panchagavya*, a mixture of cow dung, cow urine, milk, curd, ghee, jaggery, banana, tender coconut and water, and also test its efficacy on curing cancer.

This study is an example of validating traditional knowledge using modern scientific methods (setting aside for the moment whether it could actually work as validating results born of one knowledge system with the tools of another can be complicated). So we'll need to wait to find out if one MP's claim that "cow dung and urine can cure cancer" bears fruit. The systemic problem here is a desire to establish traditional knowledge as superior to scientific knowledge, a repositioning whose motivation must be fully understood before we can begin to tackle it.

Otherwise, we'll be left fighting individual battles without a chance of ever winning the war.

For example, when American researchers were granted a patent on the use of powdered turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) for healing superficial wounds, India filed a case in 1997 to have it annulled and won. The future of traditional medicine was hailed as being secure once more. As K.S. Jayaraman wrote at the time,

The US Patents and Trademark Office withdrew the patent in August 2017 after a year-long legal battle with India's Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), which argued that turmeric, a native Indian plant, had been used for centuries by its people for wound healing, and so lacked the "novelty" criterion required for patenting.

R.A. Mashelkar, the CSIR director at the time, had urged holders of traditional knowledge to document it as evidence of prior knowledge, which helped them win the case.

When studying quantum physics and finding out how its description of the nature of physical reality was strikingly similar to the concept of interdependence in Buddhism, I couldn't understand why Western texts on the history of science didn't cross-reference oriental publications. I had similar feelings when reading David Hume's essays on consciousness and the mind.

Buddhist texts are widely translated and even written in English, so I could access them and thus come to the realisation that Western philosophy does not give its Eastern counterpart enough credit.

The documentation that Mashelkar had insisted upon in the turmeric case is inaccessible here, and this needs to be fixed quickly so consumers of Western knowledge are able to come to the realisation just as those in the global south have that there's a pressing need to decolonise knowledge.

Organisations like Participatory Research in Asia have called for change at higher education and research levels to be more inclusive of what constitutes knowledge. They have raised questions about what 'knowledge' is and recommended that higher education institutions work harder to make visible whatever domains have been excluded in the past.

We need to find a way to critically review our traditional knowledge systems (whether old or new) under the bigger lens of what makes valid knowledge so in the 21st century. However, it's also important that science communicators and educators put in efforts to steer the focus onto the decolonisation of knowledge and not passively reinforce new kinds of colonisation – which 'Hindu science' would be, for example (although it is not all science).

Science communicators, educators, researchers, traditional knowledge holders and the government will all need to start working together to counter the politics of pseudoscience if we're to keep the dangers of misinterpreting science and knowledge in check. If we continue to politicise scientific knowledge, we will allow bias to persist within knowledge structures, and which can only be detrimental to a country's knowledge economy in the long run.

The Indian media, in particular, can and should address issues of science literacy in the country as science is for all, although literacy is not yet for all. It should also highlight the decolonisation of knowledge so the people can approach the subject more critically. A good way to begin would be by talking about science, academic research and knowledge production in languages other than English to kickstart healthier debates at all levels of society.

(The author would like to thank Radha Barooah for her suggestions on improving the article. It was originally published on the author's Medium page and has been republished here with permission.)

<https://thewire.in/the-sciences/the-politics-of-indian-pseudoscience-and-what-we-need-to-do-to-tame-it>

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What Makes People Distrust Science? Surprisingly, Not Politics

Bastiaan T Rutjens

Today, there is a crisis of trust in science. Many people – including politicians and, yes, even presidents – publicly express doubts about the validity of scientific findings. Meanwhile, scientific institutions and journals express their concerns about the public's increasing distrust in science. How is it possible that science, the products of which permeate our everyday lives, making them in many ways more comfortable, elicits such negative attitudes among a substantial part of the population? Understanding why people distrust science will go a long way towards understanding what needs to be done for people to take science seriously.

Political ideology is seen by many researchers as the main culprit of science skepticism. The sociologist Gordon Gauchat has shown that political conservatives in the United States have become more distrusting of science, a trend that started in the 1970s. And a swath of recent research conducted by social and political psychologists has consistently shown that climate-change skepticism in particular is typically found among those on the conservative side of the political spectrum. However, there is more to science skepticism than just political ideology.

The same research that has observed the effects of political ideology on attitudes towards climate change has also found that political ideology is *not* that predictive of skepticism about other controversial research topics. Work by the cognitive scientist Stephan Lewandowsky, as well as research led by the psychologist Sydney Scott, observed no relation between political ideology and attitudes toward genetic modification. Lewandowsky also found no clear relation between political conservatism and vaccine skepticism.

So there is more that underlies science skepticism than just political conservatism. But what? It is important to systematically map which factors do and do not contribute to science skepticism and science (dis)trust in order to provide more precise explanations for why a growing number of individuals reject the notion of anthropogenic climate change, or fear that eating genetically modified products is dangerous, or believe that vaccines cause autism.

My colleagues and I recently published a set of studies that investigated science trust and science skepticism. One of the take-home messages of our research is that it is crucial not to lump various forms of science skepticism together. And although we were certainly not the first to look beyond political ideology, we did note two important lacunae in the literature. First, religiosity has so far been curiously under-researched as a precursor to science skepticism, perhaps because political ideology commanded so much attention. Second, current research lacks a systematic investigation

into various forms of skepticism, alongside more general measures of trust in science. We attempted to correct both oversights.

People can be skeptical or distrusting of science for different reasons, whether it is about one specific finding from one discipline (for example, 'The climate is not warming, but I believe in evolution'), or about science in general ('Science is just one of many opinions'). We identified four major predictors of science acceptance and science skepticism: political ideology; religiosity; morality; and knowledge about science. These variables tend to intercorrelate – in some cases quite strongly – which means that they are potentially confounded. To illustrate, an observed relation between political conservatism and trust in science might in reality be caused by another variable, for example religiosity. When not measuring all constructs simultaneously, it is hard to properly assess what the predictive value of each of these is.

So, we investigated the heterogeneity of science skepticism among samples of North American participants (a large-scale cross-national study of science skepticism in Europe and beyond will follow). We provided participants with statements about climate change (eg, 'Human CO₂ emissions cause climate change'), genetic modification (eg, 'GM of foods is a safe and reliable technology'), and vaccination (eg, 'I believe that vaccines have negative side effects that outweigh the benefits of vaccination for children'). Participants could indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with these statements. We also measured participants' general faith in science, and included a task in which they could indicate how much federal money should be spent on science, compared with various other domains. We assessed the impact of political ideology, religiosity, moral concerns and science knowledge (measured with a science literacy test, consisting of true or false items such as 'All radioactivity is made by humans', and 'The centre of the Earth is very hot') on participants' responses to these various measures.

Political ideology did not play a meaningful role when it came to most of our measures. The only form of science skepticism that was consistently more pronounced among the politically conservative respondents in our studies was, not surprisingly, climate-change skepticism. But what about the other forms of skepticism, or skepticism of science generally?

Skepticism about genetic modification was not related to political ideology or religious beliefs, though it did correlate with science knowledge: the worse people did on the scientific literacy test, the more skeptical they were about the safety of genetically modified food. Vaccine skepticism also had no relation to political ideology, but it was strongest among religious participants, with a particular relation to moral concerns about the naturalness of vaccination.

Moving beyond domain-specific skepticism, what did we observe about a general trust in science, and the willingness to support science more broadly? The results were quite clear: trust in science was by far the lowest among the religious. In particular, religious orthodoxy was a strong negative predictor of faith in science and the orthodox participants were also the least positive about investing federal money in science. But notice here again political ideology did not contribute any meaningful variance over and beyond religiosity.

From these studies there are a couple of lessons to be learned about the current crisis of faith that plagues science. Science skepticism is quite diverse. Further, distrust of science is not really that much about political ideology, with the exception of climate-change skepticism, which is consistently found to be politically driven. Additionally, these results suggest that science skepticism cannot simply be remedied by increasing people's knowledge about science. The impact of scientific literacy on science skepticism, trust in science, and willingness to support science was minor, save for the case of genetic modification. *Some* people are reluctant to accept *particular* scientific findings, for *various* reasons. When the aim is to combat skepticism and increase trust in science, a good starting point is to acknowledge that science skepticism comes in many forms.

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<https://thewire.in/the-sciences/science-politics-distrust-ideology>

Courtesy: The Wire

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What is it like to be a Human?

Colin McGinn

Imagine an intelligent bat contemplating the mind-body problem, name of Tim Nigel. Tim Nigel has noticed that humans have an auditory sense not possessed by bats (of his species): they can hear various pitches. This enables them to appreciate music (unlike Tim and his conspecifics) and also to have other types of auditory experience not available to bats. We can suppose that bats hear only a single pitch and only echoes of their own monotone shrieks, impressive though their sense of echolocation is. Thus Nigel concludes that he doesn't know what it is like to be a human, at least so far as hearing is concerned. He has some inkling, to be sure, because he does have an auditory sense, but the range and variety of human hearing makes this sense alien to him—just as humans have an auditory sense that provides only partial insight into the auditory sense of bats. He thinks that *if* he could hear pitch variations in the manner of humans, *then* he would know (fully) what it is like to be human; but as things stand he cannot grasp the nature of human experience. This is a region of reality he cannot get his mind around (Nigel is a resolute metaphysical realist). He expresses his conclusion

by saying that human experience is “subjective” and can only be grasped “from a particular point of view”, in contrast to “objective” things that can be grasped “from many points of view, i.e. from no specific point of view”.

Having come to this conclusion he notices an implication for the mind-body problem, namely that experiences like those of humans cannot be reduced to physical facts about the human body and brain. For such physical facts can be grasped from many points of view and don’t require that one shares the point of view of the organism having the experience. Tim can know what it is to be a human, i.e. to belong to the human biological species, but he can’t grasp what it is like to belong to the psychological type exemplified by humans, i.e. beings sensitive to pitch differences. But that means that it is not possible to analyze experiences as physical states, because the former are subjective and the latter objective. He has uncovered a feature of mental concepts that renders them incapable of analysis into physical concepts. Tim’s inability to know what it is like to be a human thus leads him to reject materialism.

The essential point of his reasoning is the contrast between concepts of experience and concepts of the physical world—the point, namely, that the former are accessible only to beings that share the experience in question while the latter are not dependent in this way. You can know what it is to be a member of the human species without yourself being of that species, but you can’t know what it is like to have human experience without having that kind of experience. And you can grasp the properties of a human brain without yourself having that kind of brain, but you can’t grasp the experiential properties with which these brain properties correlate without having those properties yourself.

That is what Tim Nigel concludes from his reflections on human experience (and which he publishes a paper on with the title of the present paper—which quickly becomes classic of bat philosophy). I would like to rephrase the gist of his argument in a way that brings out its logic more clearly than in Nigel’s original formulation (not that there’s anything wrong with it!). Instead of talking about subjectivity, objectivity, and points of view, I shall say that the relevant feature of (concepts of) experience is *self-acquaintance dependence* (SAD). The term needs some unpacking. We are familiar with the idea of concepts that depend for their possession on acquaintance with members of their extension—it is a cornerstone of empiricism. Thus it may be said that the concepts *red* and *square* are acquaintance-dependent—you have to experience red and square things before you can have these concepts. Putting aside the plausibility of that position, we know what it means; well, the present idea is that certain concepts require for their possession acquaintance with instances of the property *in oneself*. That is, you have to be aware of the property as instantiated by you if you are to have the corresponding concept.

So to have a concept of a certain type of experience you have to be acquainted with instances of that type in your own person: for example, you can only have the concept of an experience of red if you have yourself had experiences of red. You have to be an instance of the general property the nature of which you aspire to grasp. Such a property is what I am calling self-acquaintance dependent: you can

grasp it only if you are acquainted with it in yourself. Thus for Tim Nigel the concept of pitch perception is SAD: it requires him to have a certain type of experience that he doesn't possess. He can't grasp human auditory experience because he lacks that type of experience, while he can grasp what it is to be human (i.e. that biological species). He can grasp the nature of P-fibers in the human brain but not the type of experience these fibers underlie. Thus experiences can't be brain states since the former concepts are SAD while the latter are not. The argument is by Leibniz's law: experiences have a property that brain states don't have, viz. self-acquaintance dependence of the relevant concepts.

Having got this far the astute Nigel wonders whether his argument generalizes: are all mental states SAD? He concludes that they are, since it is not possible to grasp what these states involve unless you yourself share them—emotions, memories, thoughts, bodily sensations, desires, volitions, etc. It is true that, like perceptual experiences, all these phenomena have non-SAD aspects: neural correlates, functional properties, non-mental causes and effects, number and duration. But these aspects don't exhaust their nature, which always has a bit of SAD in it. For example, how could you know—fully know—what anger is if you had never been angry? How could a non-thinking being know what thinking is? How can memory be fully grasped if you have never remembered anything? Moreover, Nigel concludes, no other types of concept are SAD: *only* mental concepts depend for their possession on instantiating them oneself—not mathematical concepts or moral concepts or color concepts or shape concepts or aesthetic concepts. SADness is the mark of the mental (cf. intentionality or privacy or rationality).

So, at any rate, Tim Nigel contends in his famous paper "What is it like to be a Human?", and his argument seems clear enough.

https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/what-is-it-like-to-be-a-human/?utm_source=eSkeptic&utm_campaign=0acc9be4c1-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_07_16_06_17&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8c0a740eb4-0acc9be4c1-73452969&mc_cid=0acc9be4c1&mc_eid=c1614410c4

Courtesy: Skeptic

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India never had a golden age: Interview with Prof. D.N. Jha, historian.

Ziya Us Salam

LONG before many historians called the Hindutva forces' bluff with respect to Indian history, Professor D.N. Jha had talked about the not-so-divine status of the cow in the Hindu religion. Basing his argument largely on scriptures, he came up with *The Myth of the Holy Cow*. Hindutva outfits panned the book but could not dispute the words of the holy texts he quoted. Jha stood his ground, and the cow began to be

seen as a political rather than divine animal. “The bull rather than the cow deserved a divine status,” he argued, saying that there have been temples dedicated to Nandi.

For the past few years, the soft-spoken academic has been waging another battle: safeguarding India’s pluralist past. Be it raising his voice against atrocities inflicted on minorities and Dalits or exposing the shallowness of the Bharat Mata ki Jai slogan, Jha’s arguments are rooted in history. He has argued that the way forward is not through a slogan like Bharat Mata ki Jai but Jai Hind, not through Brahmanical superiority but egalitarianism. He disagrees with any notion of a mythical golden age in Indian history, arguing that kings, whatever their religion, have always waged battles for political superiority.

In his latest book, *Against the Grain*, released recently, he continues his battle for writing history right.

Excerpts from an interview:

The Constitution says “India that is Bharat”, yet there was no concept of Bharat as a cohesive nation for the longest time. How do you explain this anomaly? Also, with the given history, how honest is it to make a slogan like Bharat Mata ki Jai the benchmark of nationalism?

It is true that Bharata as a country evolved over a long time. It does not occur in the entire corpus of the Vedic texts, though the Bharat tribe is mentioned in some of them. The first mention of Bharata in the territorial sense is found in an inscription of the Kalinga king Kharavela (1st century BCE), but in later Sanskrit texts (which I have consulted) wherever it is mentioned, its geographical connotation remains, by and large, ambiguous. It is only in the late 19th century that Bharata came to denote the whole of India as we have it today. This coincided with the rise of Indian nationalism, but, curiously, it now appeared as a mother. The earlier Bharata morphed into Bharata Mata in a song of Dwijendra Lal Roy (1863-1913) and she figures as such prominently in several other late 19th century works, including *Anand Math* of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya. This change of gender—Bharata becoming a Mata (mother)—may be a theme of the nationalist discourse among specialists, but it is strange that Queen Victoria was visualised as a guardian of Mother India. Equally curious is the depiction of India as Lady Hind holding the flag of the British Empire jointly with Britannica in cartoons published in the *Hindi Punch* as early as 1904. So a non-specialist may ask himself, what kind of nationalism was this? Historically, Bharata Mata is hardly a century and a quarter old; her contemporary, gau mata, is almost the same age. Recently, the Madhya Pradesh government created another Mata, Rashtramata, out of Malik Muhammad Jayasi’s “Padmavati”. So I am confused which of these Matas could become the benchmark of Indian nationalism. I would, therefore, prefer Jai Hind over Bharata Mata.

Prominent travellers to India, including Francois Bernier and Johann Gottfried von Herder, refer to mild-natured Hindus, those who assimilated what they could, made space for everyone. Yet we have Alberuni’s distinctly different account. When exactly do we notice a change from

Hindus being gentle people to those who considered foreigners impure or mlechha? If the tolerant tag is well deserved, how does one explain the Brahmanical hostility to Buddhism?

I would say that both views are largely correct. When Alberuni (973-1048) wrote about the intolerance, haughtiness and conceit of Hindus, conflict between Brahmanism and Shramanic religions (Buddhism and Jainism, especially the former) was at its peak; Buddhism was on the verge of being driven out of the country as appears from the sustained Brahmanical assault on Buddhist establishments.

In fact, Brahmanical intolerance of other religions is amply attested by our sources, and you are right in saying that Brahmins treated foreigners as mlecchas. It is possible that Alberuni may have made his statement against this background of antagonism between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical religions.

But at the time when foreigners like Francois Bernier (1620-1688) and others wrote about India, the religious scenario was different: there was no religious rivalry between Brahmanism and Shramanism; Buddhism had almost disappeared from the country of its birth and had settled outside India; even the contradiction between Hinduism and Islam was not very sharp.

Also, one has to keep in mind that alongside the long history of sectarian conflict within Brahmanism and its antagonism towards other religions, there is, in India, an equally long history of the coexistence of religions, and of mutual borrowings among them. This syncretism is an important feature of India's religious history. And despite the much-trumpeted conflict between Hinduism and Islam, even these two religions borrowed much from each other. An example of mutual borrowing between the two religions that comes readily to mind is the identification of the cult of the Muslim Satya Pir with that of the Satyanarayan Puja, prevalent in Bengal and adjoining regions. So it is likely that Bernier and other foreigners took notice of this kind of long syncretic tradition of India and spoke of tolerant Hinduism.

In recent times, we have had the exclusive and exclusionist leanings of Dayananda Saraswati and Ramakrishna Paramahansa being readily accepted. Is that the way forward?

No, I don't think so. Dayananda Saraswati founded the Arya Samaj in 1875; the same year he wrote a book called *Satyarth Prakash* whose last two chapters are devoted entirely to the denunciation of Christianity and Islam. Nor are the teachings of Ramakrishna acceptable as a way forward. His ardent and most prominent disciple, Vivekananda (1863-1902), who founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 for the promotion and propagation of Advaita Vedanta, spoke of religious tolerance but spewed venom against Islam as is indicated by the statement that "from Pacific to the Atlantic for five hundred years blood ran all over the world... that is Mohammadanism" (Shakespeare Club of Pasadena, California, February 3, 1900). Given these facts, the ideas of neither of the two "great" spiritual masters are acceptable. Moreover, as we are aware, their ideas are feeding into Hindutva which in everyday life

these days means lynching of Muslims and Dalits, attacks on mosques and churches, horrendous crimes against women, etc.

The best way forward, therefore, is to leave the people to themselves. Every individual should be allowed to practise the religion of his choice without the direct or indirect interference of the state as guaranteed by our Constitution.

In the run-up to the Karnataka Assembly elections, we have had a unique case of the State government deciding to confer on Lingayats the status of a distinct religious community. How well founded in history is the claim or the decision?

I would not like to discuss the electoral politics of Karnataka; I leave that to political commentators. But so far as the Lingayats are concerned it is well known that their emergence as a major religious force in north-western Karnataka took place around the 12th century. Basavanna contributed greatly to their movement, which differed from orthodox Hinduism in many ways. It was anti-Brahmanical, anti-caste and anti-Vedic; its followers, both men and women, wear a linga (which they call ishtalinga) on their body and do not bother about the worship of an idol in a temple. Given this background of Lingayats, I feel there is some substance in recognising them as a separate religious community.

With the advancement of aggressive Hindutva, we have had a number of Dalits, and even leaders like Mayawati, threatening to convert to Buddhism. Is it not a reverse flow of events? I ask this because in history we have instances of the victorious king imposing his faith on the vanquished. Like the Pandian king of Madurai, a practitioner of Jain faith, being forced to convert to Saivism.

The legend of the Pandian king has been extensively written about and scholars have questioned its authenticity. But so far as the conversion of Dalits is concerned, I would like to say that their mass conversion to Buddhism or even to Islam has been caused largely by the inequities of the Indian caste system, which is defended by Hindutva ideologues. In this context, it is worthwhile remembering the conversion of Babasaheb Ambedkar to Buddhism, in 1956, along with nearly half a million “untouchables”.

In “Against the Grain”, you refer to Hindutva ideologues who look at ancient India as some kind of a mythical golden age, a time when there was social harmony, economic prosperity, etc. How well founded is the claim?

During the freedom struggle, Indian historians indulged in an uncritical glorification of pre-Islamic India: the Indian state was described as a constitutional monarchy; tribal oligarchies were equated with Athenian democracy; the village assemblies (sabhas) in south India were portrayed as little

democracies; the period of the Gupta rulers was treated as the golden age when the Indian people were happy and prosperous and lived in peace and harmony. This picture of ancient India supplied an ideological support to freedom fighters; but after India's Independence it served no such purpose though the Hindutva ideologues have clung on to these ideas, and, inspired by them, even our Prime Minister has made laughable statements about the Indian past on several occasions. But a scientific analysis of our sources amply proves that at no stage in history the common people of India witnessed a truly golden age. The history of India, like that of any other country, has been a story of social inequities, exploitation of the common people, religious conflict, and so on. The idea of a golden age has always been abused, in India as well as in other countries.

Even as the fight over the Babri Masjid goes on and on, we know that some Buddhist structures were not left untouched by revivalist Hindu kings. For instance, Hindu temples in Nalanda university. If so, is it true that our entire history has been a game of “might is right”?

What you describe as “might is right” may be true at one level. But that is also an oversimplification. It may not have been the king who always played a role in case of religious confrontation. The Babri Masjid was demolished with the connivance of the Indian state. In history, the adherents of one religion may have played a prominent role in attacking the religious establishments of other religions that they perceived as their rivals.

The reason for this may have been rooted in deeper historical processes and one can't argue that so and so king imposed his religion on others. For example, when we speak of the Brahmanical assault on Buddhism, it will have to be seen against the background of the doctrinal changes in Buddhism and Brahmanism, as well as in their changing social and material context, their social base and their source of patronage, etc.

<http://www.frontline.in/arts-and-culture/literature/india-never-had-a-golden-age/article10108362.ece>

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